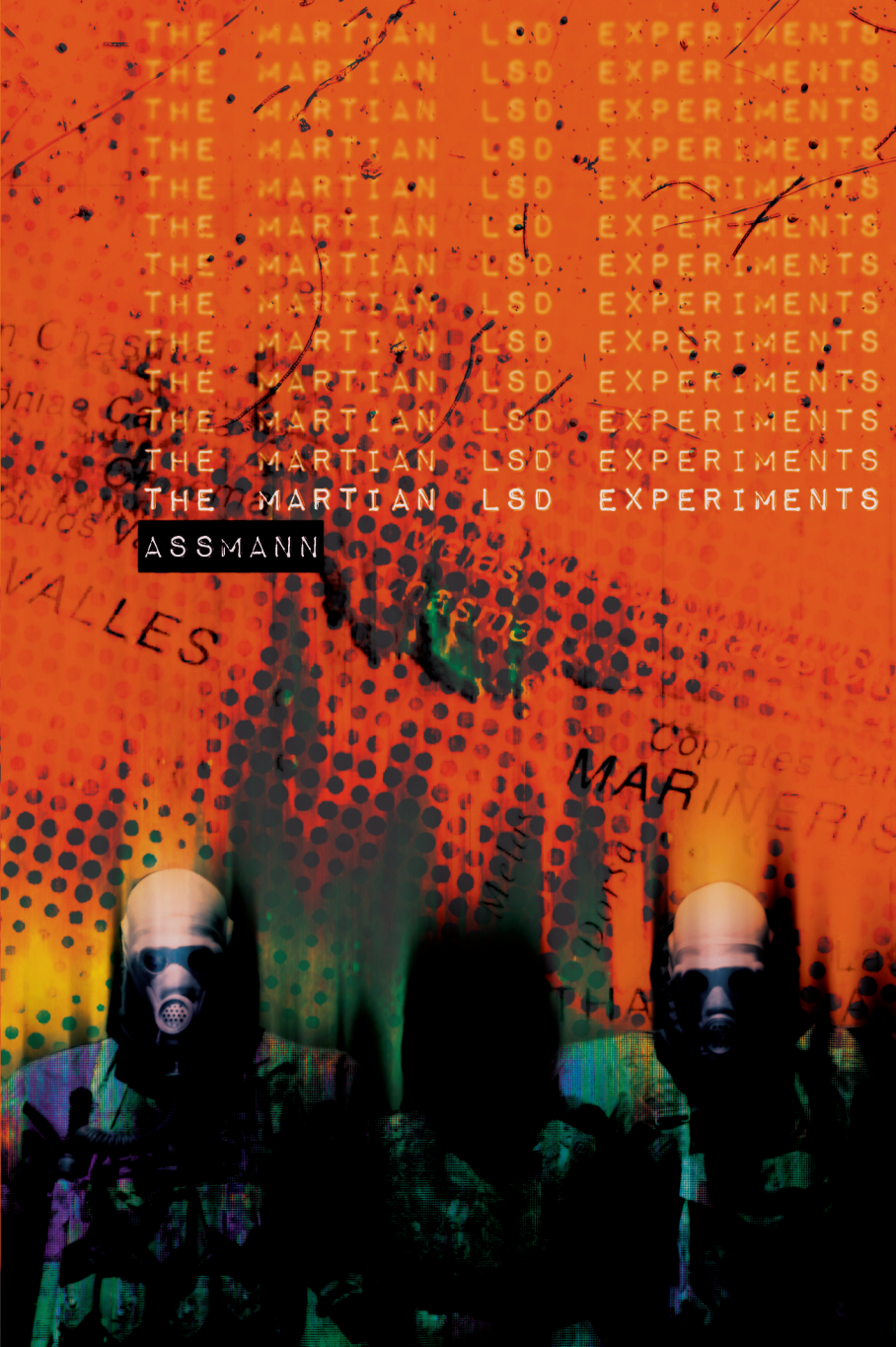
THE MARTIAN LSD EXPERIMENTS

ASSMANN



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
UNITED STATES GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Prepared in Cooperation with the
JET PROPULSION LABORATORY, CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
FOR THE LANGLEY RESEARCH CENTER,
NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION

ITA LEAP SERIES
1:2,000,000 TOPOGRAPHIC SERIES
CYDONIA REGION
M 1M 44/10 R
1976

NOTES ON MAPS

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ABBREVIATIONS

[illegible]

PROJECTIONS

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CONTROL

[illegible]

MAPPING TECHNIQUES

[illegible]

COLOR

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NOMENCLATURE

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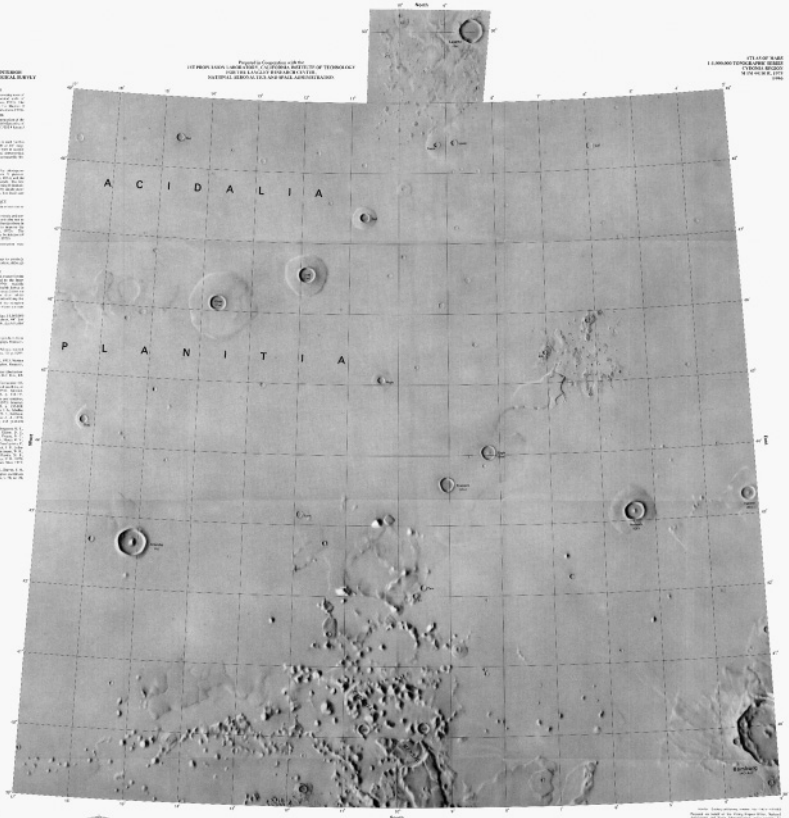

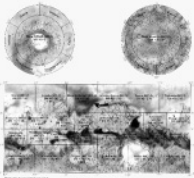

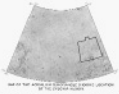

SHADED RELIEF MAP OF THE CYDONIA REGION OF MARS

M 1M 44/10 R

1976

Sections of this book previously appeared in *Alienist* & *Mycelia*.


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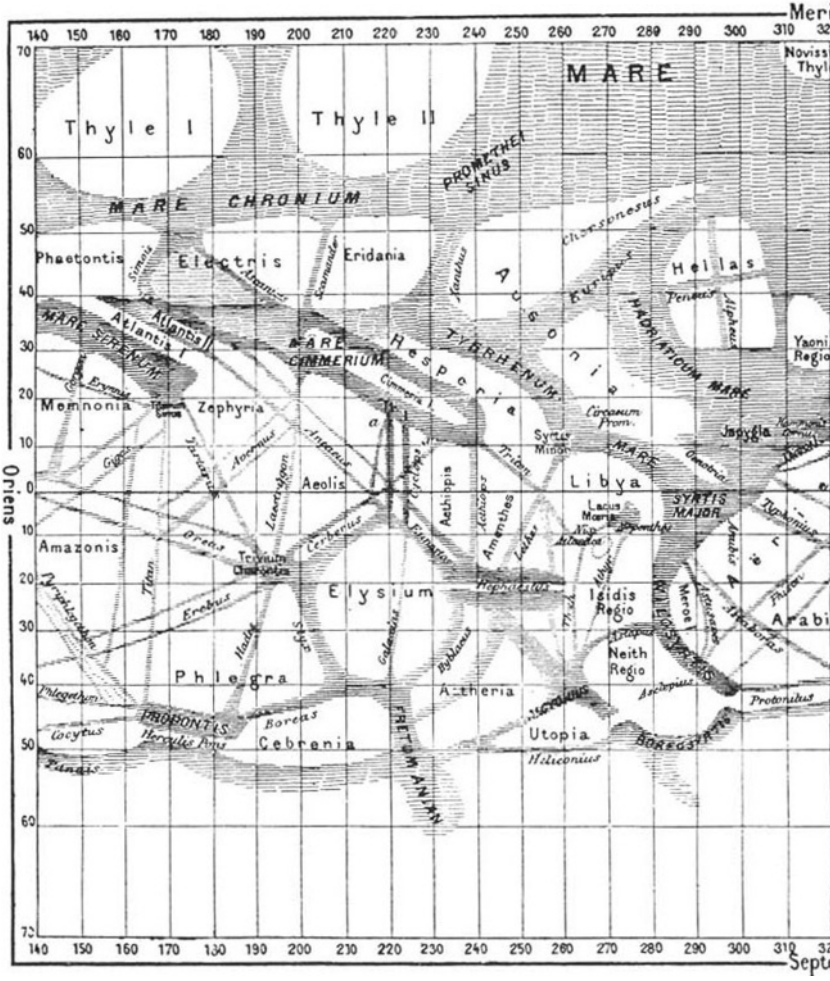
THE MARTIAN MISSPERI-MENTS

ASSMANN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Penaeus
Alpheus
MARE SERENUM
Atlantis
Atlantis II
MARE CIMMERIUM
Hesperia
TYRRHENUM
ADRIATICUM MARE
Yaoni Regio
Memnonia
Zephyria
Eryx
Gigas
Tartarus
Anopus
Anapus
Cimmeria
Cyclops
Triton
Syrtis Minor
Cirrhaeum Prom.
MARE
Japygia
Aeolis
Aethiopis
Libya
Lacus Mortis
SYRTIS MAJOR
Amazonis
Orcus
Laestrygon
Cerberus
Euripus
Lacus
Amenthes
Lethe
Nilus
Tritonis
Tritonis Chersonesus
Elysium
Hephaestus
Isidis Regio
Arabi
Titan
Erebus
Styx
Galaxias
Phlegra
Aetheria
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Ancipius
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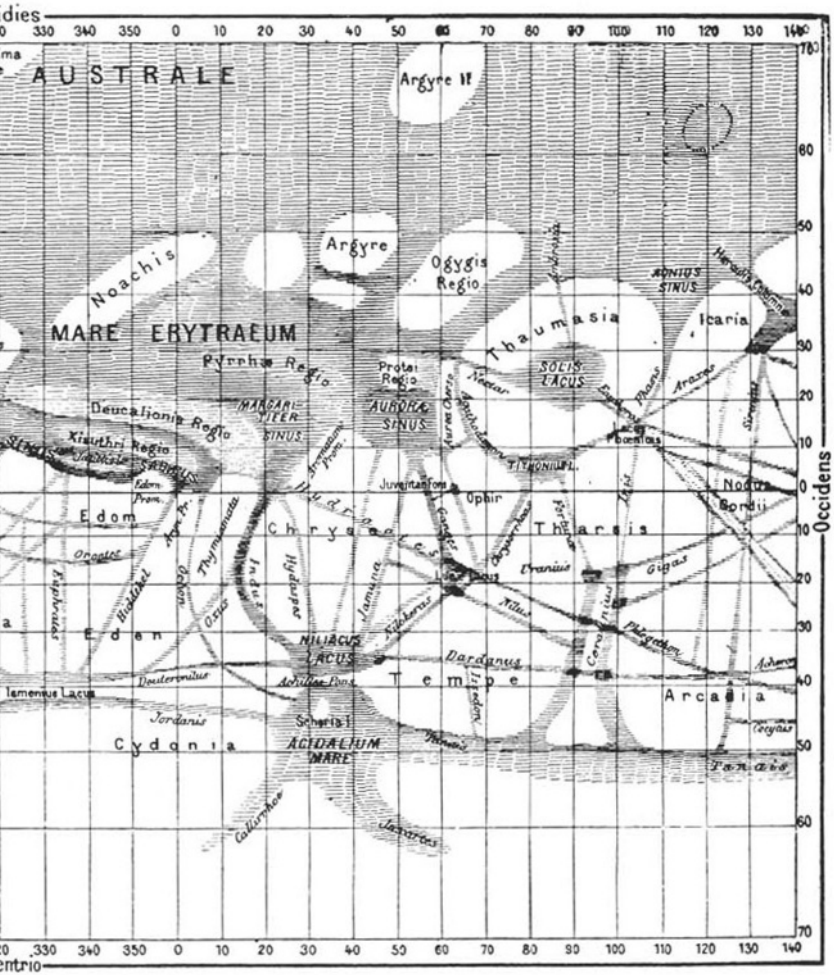
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AURORAE SINUS
MARGARITIFER SINUS
Deucalionis Regio
Xisuthri Regio
Phoenicis
Edom
Juventae fons
Ophir
Nodus Gordii
Chryse
Thharsis
Eden
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Dardanus
Tempe
Arcadia
Lacus Lamenius
Jordanis
Cydonia
ACIDALIUM MARE
Tanaïs
Occidens
Meridies
Septentrio

WARNING!

What you are about to read may disturb you. Possible effects include dizziness, numbness, tremours, disillusionment. Symptoms may be of indefinite duration. The recommendations included in this report are restricted to Level X & require a corresponding level of security clearance. Guard against unauthorised disclosure incidents or data-spills. Because disillusionment subverts the distinction between reality & unreality, the metrics contained in this document have been classified for "impending recall." Stimulation of serotonin production in the cortex & deep structures of the brain impacts upon the visualisation & interpretation of the Real World. Indicators include ideological disorientation, cognitive impairment, fear of authority, paranoia, dissociation, panic. Conditions of synaesthesia & alienism have also been observed. In some cases these produce a false appearance of demystification in tandem with irrational pseudo-emancipatory impulses. Treatment presents risk of inducing reactive psychosis, anxiety, pain, death. This data has been published solely for the purpose of further informed investigation. Conclusions arrived at in this document do not reflect an existing policy position. Volunteer inmates often describe being caused to experience reality as "altered," or as a simulacrum, or subject to manipulation by undisclosed forces. It has been conclusively demonstrated that these are crudely constructed hallucinations, subliminally-induced yet potentially seditious in nature. The counterfactual belief in such "truth-perception" may, in uncontrolled conditions, become epidemic. It is the Committee's recommendation, therefore, that disillusionment be classed as an ideological virus with acute psychiatric pathology. This is an archived report & may be out of date. Accessing this file without authorisation may trigger invasive schizoanalysis. All effort has been made to limit the adverse impact of these experiments. ComSec accepts no liability for unauthorised use of this data.

Cydonia – Mars Colony – the present.

A psychocivilisational experiment has produced an evolved Corporate-State Apparatus in which all social & political relations are fatally entrapped inside an hallucination.

In such a world, where the irreal has become the last viable human habitat, inhumanity represents the final refuge of "ideological struggle."

Yet to murder an illusion, it is necessary to become an illusion.

And the escape from the mind-control labyrinth leads through the uncharted Maze of false disillusionment, where there is no Theseus & myth itself is the Minotaur.

Thus spake Assmann.

I

[SINGULARITY]

"Mind chemically weeps."
Los Assmann, ID:N/M

A desolation of red. It stretched in seamless 360º panorama, surrounding the drone-eye like a paradox, its distance pressed claustrophobically near to the lens. Behind it, a rumour of voices, crossed signals, radio static.

In the arcane mind of the Operator, the alien landscape resembles nothing so much as a red brick tenement wall, from one of those early industrial centuries, through which the sub-proletariat eavesdropped on one another's alienation.

A frozen, airless, desolation of red.

The infallible technicians would've been hard-pressed to design a more fitting workers' paradise than this, for the present-day scions of Milton Friedman & Wernher von Braun. Palsied from a diet of chloride, pyroxene & rust. You may recall them, mafic-eyed molemen, dwellers of pestilential airlocks, sallow of prospect, scurvy, prematurely depleted.

Their labours have hollowed the dead ground to vertiginous depths you call habitat. Have fed the oxygenators, the solar-cells. Have transmuted Martian tundra to Amazons of lush artifice. They are to you as the early part of night is to a blood moon – generations factored by Panic & Dread, as by furious twins in contrary motion.

It's no secret the future belongs to any but them.

They came here to die & have succeeded only partially. The camera intuits them beneath the tumuli accreted at the colony's perimeter, unrecycled biomass for an agrarian pipedream. Perhaps tomorrow their spectres will entertain a more ironically-attuned species of machine. One less like them. Power's a funny thing.

But we're not there yet.

The drone dips & veers in the thin atmosphere, making its approach. Its target, framed in digital crosshatch, glows green. A leached-out green against a desolation of red. It could've hung on a museum wall. *Untitled Landscape (Homage to the Square)*. For, until it erupts, the target configuration is a right-angled equilateral parallelogram.

The dosages themselves are unpredictable. Often sleep refuses to follow. Fatigue. Exhaustion. Mental blankness. At others a disconcerting euphoria. The resistance is growing. For every week in hibernation, there are two, sometimes three, of bleakest twilight.

A singularity, Assmann's IQ-app told him as he drifted down through the foggy viscous green, *is the point at which all possible worlds coincide*. On his monitor, a checkerboard of mildewed grey & black faded-in. Trailing its life-support tubes, a body came slowly into view. Congealed yellow skin. Electrode mesh. Catheter. Intravenous cartridges. Mask. He toggled the POV. Now he was staring straight up at the cryo-tank airlock, circling counterclockwise with the current. In accordance with some pre-programmed routine, his arms or legs would periodically be made to flex against the flow, in a motion he still hadn't learnt to describe. It felt like aliens controlling his body while he watched. The pressure of the saline, he knew, was the only thing keeping his entire musculature from atrophy. The weight of it against his chest as he breathed, in place of an atmosphere. That & the strangeness of being awake & unconscious at the same time. He wondered how long it'd take for evolution to clue-in that there was no going back. From now on, even if he swam all the way to Mars, he'd always be the proverbial fish out of water.

There was talk of the Terraform Commission exploding H-bombs way down close to the mantle. A controlled series of detonations, strung like a daisychain along the equator, intended – so it was rumoured – to produce a seismic wave that'd cycle round Mars & unstall the dynamo at its core. If it didn't just crack the planet in half, the idea was it'd snap the magnetosphere back on. Been switched off 500 million years ago, so they were planning to make it B-I-G. Soviet-era stuff out of cold storage. Warm things up a tad. Melt some of that polar CO_2 ice & get the greenhouse gasses stirring. Grow a breathable atmosphere & all that. Cld always trust TerraCom to hit a bright idea smackbang on the head.

Curled in his CryoSa©, Assmann dreamt of prenatal life among the robots. Eighteen months in low-energy-transit: nine successive months the screws turned, his doppelganger choked on its saline solution, humiliated itself in full view of the electrode array. Then nine more to reacclimatise. Like being born twice. His nightmares turned to Soylent Green feedback loop. Assmann[1] being a figment of Assmann[2] & vice-versa. A quicksilver catheter turning him black from the inside. A vacuum tube for the bad blood leeching him white. The cryo-goop bubbled. Any moment now they'd wake him up for real & spoil his beauty-sleep. Retrothruster comedown. The engine was cast from titanium alloy & wouldn't succumb below 3000° centigrade. Such facts were meant to instill confidence. His login was "FreeFall." In the beginning, the singularity was masked by a 3D hologram no-one could see past & required forceps. Gurgling happy in his muck, Assmann fingered the replay switch. Once more Miss Monde vaulted his supine face. *You think there's something mystical stuffed up there?* she smiled. A milk-moon of liquid hydrocarbon. Barium heat. Vast quasars of most distant red. Suddenly a profound depression came over him. A singular thought forced all else from his mind: What was an exile but one who was prisoner to an idea from which there was *only* escape, yet which could never *be* escaped? The Mars Orbit Injection routine flashed on the monitor. Out of the CryoSa©'s artificial gravity he was a man at sea. Seamlessly the onboard brain executed a vertical descent. The narrative was designed to withstand impact yet still collapsed. Launch-pad feeding tracts of dead reckoning, molten beneath the rubble. The recovery drone relayed the wrong coordinate.

First view: A terrain scanned from low orbit. Light tracing the contours. North-south like magnetic bands. Pipelines. Beltways. Hatcheries. Greenhouses of bio luminescent feedstock. Monday. Tharsis Rise. Month 18/September B.

Something arrives out of a hostile & improbable distance, assuming a form at once concrete & phantasmagoric: it is Deimos, lesser of the moons, inching above the ice reefs like a mouldy regolith. Assmann walked along the beach, in the fissures of the thin ice-ledge. As far as he knew, the beach had always been there, red sand stretching away in a gentle curve under a sky of chrome yellow, dunes banked tumulus-like sloping into the frozen tide. Coming to a bluff, he paused, cupped his ear against the wind & listened, but all he could hear was static. Beside him, hunched in his shadow, a foetus-eyed thing watched up at him. When he walked, it half-staggered, half-waddled after him in its amniotic sac. Flapped its arms. Keened inaudibly. Whenever Assmann stopped, it perched by his leg, watching him as it was watching him now. Assmann had become aware of the creature only by facets the first time he'd wandered the shoreline. It'd disconcerted him then, but he'd soon learnt to pay it no mind. Some kind of Mars creature, he supposed. It'd appeared from nowhere. Perhaps it'd lost its mother. There was nothing he could see for it to eat & had nothing to offer. Perhaps it wasn't even hungry. It simply followed him, now as it had then. It would follow as far along the shore as he went, then watch him all the way back.

We put to sail on the *Recovery* at 9 o'clock in the evening & had no sooner got clear of the Plateau than we encountered a gale from NNW, which we steered till morning, when the weather turned squally attended with meteor showers. At noon the sun was nearly in our zenith, yet being hazy had no observation. That afternoon saw fresh gales with lightning, which continued till 8pm, then a very heavy shower of meteorites. The following morning marked a change: a still sky & dark stony weather. At noon it rained excessive hard amid a sudden sandstorm, after which it became fair giving us an opportunity to observe the sun's meridian altitude, which we have not been able these past days. Light breezes & clear weather continued. Many winged creatures about the sloop, especially those named by the crew "roobats" on account of their aerial bounding, some of which we caught with hook & line. At 6.24pm the larger of the twin moons rose about 4 digits eclipsed. That night the wind picked up again & continued about two days at NE then veered South where it remained two days longer before fixing at SE which carried us across the dunes within sight of the Rift. We did not strike soundings till we were 50 fathoms off. A clear sky afforded a prospect of the distant calderas & escarpments, yet the highest peaks already lay obscured by an horizon. Exiting the dunes, we anchored at 5 fathoms in the mouth of a small inflow, about 10 miles distant from the Great Maze. We hoisted out a drone & sent it round to a point on the larboard hand to take a survey of the terrain ahead. As the weather continued fair we elected to proceed into the canyons. The banded cliff formations grew progressively larger till after 3 days the Sexton estimated them to a height of several miles. Here & there we sighted enormous lichens. A steady wind followed us the while. On each of the nights a heavy storm passed over, but continuing in the lee of the Rift we remained for the most part sheltered from the weather. By the 4th morn we observed the opposing shore to recede utterly from view, the canyon we were traversing had so widened. It was with difficulty we steered a course, as there was no surety of where a bearing presented the main branch & where a tributary. We continued thus for 3 days before running afoul of a sandstorm that completely inundated the ship. We have been holed up since, bailing & undertaking desperately needed repairs, cognisant of our dwindling supplies. The storm has transfigured the landscape, which no longer resembles our drone's reconnaissance. Our bearings show us far off-course, though we have no way of asserting where. Our charts are sorely inadequate to the task. I have ordered the sloop to be prepared in order that a select party be able to proceed ahead to the outpost at Cydonia. It is said the Maze endures 4000 miles end-to-end, though none have traversed it. Destiny willing, we shall be the first.

They sat around the fire & murmured against the oblivion beyond the light of the flames.

Assmann felt, as he sat there among the tribe, as if he were facing in two directions at once. Somewhere out in the darkness, he was sure, their quarry lay watching them, & even now he saw himself as if through its eyes. An indefinite figure, huddled against a dim fire. In his thoughts, it was the quarry that was hunting *them*. The idea wouldn't leave him. He tried to dispel it by restating their purpose, focusing the tribe's attention upon the task ahead. But as soon as he spoke, the thing he intended was lost, the words existed both everywhere & nowhere. It was the same whenever he sought, in that hackneyed expression, to gaze inwards: his mind would go utterly blank. He might try to catch it unawares, but to no avail, it always saw him coming.

Mumbling, Assmann allowed his words to veer off, to attach to some trivial thing, the direction of the weather, the proximity of the escarpments, the immanence of danger. For the world had gotten the better of him the moment he'd spilled from the womb & he knew it. Yet to the others seated beside him, the laconic understatement of his speech pressed to their own minds the image of a man who'd conquered his fears, & in having done so might conquer theirs. They were prepared to follow him. It was a great deal for Assmann to have on his conscience. After the fire had died & they'd hunkered down for the night, the hours till dawn would never be long enough to catalogue his doubts. Nor his crimes. For every decision he'd ever made, he'd secretly been the first to betray.

Staring blind at the drone sky, ice up to the focsle. Long shadows by bulk: machine nature twice discarded. Wound was surplus. In cold blood punishment or damage, would cease more stoic than hesitation. Signal misalignment in the fraudcast band. And stood there, by erased reckoning, periscope to eyewhite, as naked as the Word & twice as dead.

The anaesthesia wore off by increments. It seemed like days before he could see through the mist.
He wanted someone to tell him if the operation had been a success.
He waited, but no-one came.
There were clues, nevertheless, to their presence.
A shift in the air.
A replenished saline drip.
He'd lie with his eyes closed to tempt them out of the shadows, catch them when they thought he was asleep.
Blarpblarpblarp went the oscilloscope, betraying him every time.
Although they'd left him in restraints, he was still able to shift his body enough to feel it splayed beneath him more or less familiar.
On occasion, a sudden feeling of asphyxiation.
Head tilted wrong, the lungs.
A machine pumped the excess from various cavities.
Nine months in cryo-sleep he'd started to fuse with the stuff.
Rhizomic outgrowths from the lymph nodes. In the most advanced state, they looked like foetal polyps.
A distended sac on a long stalk waving in the currents of cryo-goo searching for an anchor point.
One of them had grafted onto the inner lining of the CryoSa©, incorporating itself into it.
Alarms had gone off.
A medivac crew had been waiting at the Mars Orbit Injection rendezvous.
A pair of surgical drones the size of tennis balls.
They'd revived him long enough to see the frozen stare of the homunculus.
A miniature face exactly like his.
It was enough.
He never wanted to see anything like it again.

Water restrictions & food rationing had been in place now for over 300 sols. Every time a transport arrived, half the cargo disappeared straight onto the black market. The central stores had been raided down to the last stash of Durex & Rice Crispies. There was no doubt in Assmann's mind that someone at the top had to be in on it. It'd all started with the mining franchises. Suddenly everyone wasn't in the same boat anymore. Progress, they called it. Entrepreneurialism. The free market. But with no water in the communal reservoirs there was no fuel to power the extractors or melt the ice or run the purifiers or keep the pumps operational. The vicious circle was tightening. Pretty soon the entire system'd break down & they'd starve, asphyxiate or freeze to death, & the mining companies'd swan on in like it was a holiday camp & put their robots to work making everything just peachy.

Through cracked binoculars, Assmann had an indistinct view of the *Recovery*'s crew lined up on the glacier, paying their last respects to their dead captain. A tide of rust had spread a red carpet over the burial mound in continuous gusts. The *Recovery*'s hulk lay grimly silhouetted in the background. Locked in the ice, it was slowly being crushed. Its groans were audible even at that distance. Some way astern of it, a sloop stood ready-provisioned on its skis.

Assmann observed the scene in mounting panic. Soon the crew's ritual would be completed & they'd set about their departure. He scrambled to higher ground, snatching the flare-gun from his hip. Aiming into the sky he fired, but the flare fizzled in the breach. Assmann screamed into his ventilator & hurled the gun across the rise, where it clunked out of sight. He waved his arms in the air. Jumped. Waved. Without the aid of magnification, the *Recovery*'s crew were like ants disappearing into brickwork.

Assmann watched hopelessly as the sloop drifted from view. A family of roobats, perched on a nearby dune, took in the whole spectacle with naked inquisitiveness.

“**May my arse burn in hell**,” Assmann ranted at the Medical Officer, “**if what I say isn’t the truth**.”

He took in the faces around the Mission Control conference table, detail by detail. His mind moved with a glaciality of purpose, unbetrayed by the tundral blue of his stare. Assmann was quite aware that the others in the room were all delusional, yet their delusion was that they were each reasonable individuals. Even before they'd sat down, Assmann had already decided the best approach would be to humour them. It would only upset the meeting's equilibrium unnecessarily if he treated these socalled colleagues as the flagrant psychiatric cases they undoubtedly were. By playing along with their delusions he'd demonstrate, by the force of his own example, what true rationality was. Perhaps he'd even succeed in bringing some of them towards the light of sanity, enabling them, by meeting's end, to perceive how their every prior notion had been a sham. They'd recognise themselves for what they were, & him for what he was – a Reasonable Man – & the scales would fall from their eyes. Reason itself would beckon to them. And they'd reach out with their hearts & minds to embrace it.

"I'm not a robot," Assmann[1] repeated into the vocoscan for the umpteenth time, hunched against the swirling dust. The blue jelly pulsed inside its holocube beside the hatch, forming & unforming in rhythmic ambivalence while the glitch cycled once more through its validation routine. The jelly's translucent bell seemed to mouth Assmann[1]'s words back at him with a malevolent irony of purpose, like an eight-eyed *medulla oblongata* trailing a knotted spinal cord, sizing him up for a bodysnatch. Zap him with its neurotoxin & who knew what else, slither out of its holocube & right into his eyesocket. The vocoscan froze. Reloaded.

"Jesuschrist," Assmann[1] hissed, "I *am not* a fucking robot!"

Fifteen minutes out in a sandstorm just to get inside the HAB. Assmann[1] leant in closer, keeping an eye on the jellyfish. He struggled to keep his voice in check:

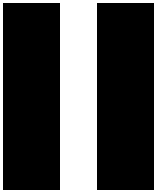
"I'M NOT A ROBOT!"

Assmann[1] wondered what this must've looked like on the security cam, if it looked like anything at all in that weather. He waved his decal at the lens to no effect. He was sorely tempted to smash the damn thing, a predictably irrational & counterproductive response. Strange how in the space of a few minutes you could have nothing left to lose. Maybe one of those arseholes in Human Resources had set it up to run as a behaviour experiment. Or maybe it was the machines, wearing them down, attritional warfare. Or else it was just another piece of garbage the Agency had got on the cheep that they didn't have a programmer sublicensed to fix.

The jelly seemed to pulse bluer. Static washed back through the intercom. Finally the cube turned green & the hatch jerked aside on its hydraulic swing-arm. Assmann[1] ducked & stepped through. The hydraulics exhaled as the hatch jerked closed behind him. He tossed his binoculars onto the HAB's User Interface Console, hanging his ventilator on the back of the chair & shucking bulldust from his suit as he slumped down. The screen in the middle of the Console blinked behind a pixel cascade. *Well there's yer goddam problem right there*.

"You've really got to get that fixed," he said, swivelling to face the CryoSa© he'd salvaged from the ship.

Assmann[2] stared back at him unblinking through saline goo & overgrown hair. A faint blip sounded from his decal. *Yep, still alive in there*. But if they weren't rescued soon, *for how much longer*?



[HUNGERBEASTS]

"I cannot,"
Louie Assmann,
the Petro-Mars
station manager,
told his anonymous
correspondent,
"as yet give you any
account of that Land,
excepting it was
mortally cold."

The place was a smouldering wreck. In the shade of a rusted palm tree drooping over the Beltway, a drunk, reeking of formalin & ethanol, lay marooned, blanketed with sand-flies.

Dangling from a coathanger snagged on low palm frond was a repurposed saline-drip, from which a tube dangled down to the drunk's snoring mouth. There was the unmistakable twang of an electric banjo from the proximity of a pair of swing-doors, done up saloon-style for the recent blow-ins – of which there were at least a dozen in matching Stetsons & longhorn beltbuckles that moment sipping the cool air inside the Cydonia Hotel bar.

The regular clientele, wrong-complexioned, had for the sake of the planet's tourism crusade been given the bum's rush. A couple of ComSec drones were stationed streetside to discourage rioting. There'd been tedious committee talk in the Terraform Commission about HungerBeasts crouching with monkey-wrenches on the wrong side of the tracks, biding their time.

The tourists, meanwhile, sucked on the airconditioning, tapping their vat-gown snakeskin boots to analogue Patsy Cline, oblivious.

Until that red Beast-swarm arrived, about the most dangerous thing out on the Beltway, barring the drunk sucking hot ethanol & the ComSec pigs scowling in their pigmobiles, was Bogart & Sal grinding up to the traffic lights shortly before mid-afternoon in a black '76 Valiant Ranger, AMBULANCE stencilled in day-glo on the roof, stereo belching *Kill kill kill the poor* as they grinned psychotically at betassled pedestrians, flipped the bird, & revved their glorified dumpcart the fuck outa there.

There're numbers for everything. Primes. Fractions. Irrationals. Base coordinates, orientations, movements, calculations, *processes*. But also the opposite. Numbers for everything that can be described & for everything that can't. In other words, even this, even the nondescript, the non-describable. As for stupidity, the question remains. Is a number a description? Does a description convey the qualities of what it describes? Can a description be stupid that isn't, in some sense, a description of stupidity? To describe. The act of describing. The belief in the possibility of describing.

The morning Bogart's pet roo-bat dragged in the half-chewed comey was the morning they found Col Farrell sliced ear to ear with the Slav's razor behind the Cydonia Hotel. When the cops came for him in his tent, the Slav was passed out on a busted camp-bed hugging an empty bottle of 'Berg. Assmann heard the story from the Semantix Twins, who heard it from Bogart, who swore he'd seen the corpse with his own eyes. "Like someone'd painted a bloody big grin on it." And that's how the riot started.

The camp down along the belt-tracks was mostly immigrant 'fugees from the mines, the rest were fettlers like the Old Man. Before the drought, the Old Man had farmed a soldier-settler plot at Wadi Creek, but he'd packed their family up when Assmann was just two & took the only paying work on offer, as a linesman for the Great Southern Beltway. First they'd lived in a 12ft tent at the Wadi Creek Junction, then Q'irindi, Cydonia & all the way out at Q'oonabar, where the Old Man ganged on the Binnaway Line.

It wasn't till Assmann was nine that the Old Man pulled the ticket for the overseer's HAB at Yannergee, 40 miles west of the Ridge & another 3000 from the depot at Tharsis Rise – by which stage there were six kids in tow & another on spec.

"You wanna survive out here, gotta breed faster than the other bastards."

"Like comeys," Bogart used very sagely to say.

Which probably had something to do with why Col Farrell got his throat slit by the Slav behind the Cydonia Hotel. Seems word got around that Col Farrell'd been tending the other man's patch while the Slav was out ganging on the line. "Tending the other man's patch" was what Assmann's mum'd said.

The riot swept through the camp like a bushfire through tinder. Assmann watched it spread along the tracks from a vantage atop the Gang Shed with Bogart & the other kids – Bogart still holding the mauled comey by its ears, fur sticky with the muck dripping out of it. The roobat was always dragging things in, "offerings" their mum called them, sand-moles usually, sometimes a pangoon. If it was a pangoon & still halfway edible their mum'd clean it & put it in a pot to make pangoon soup. "Waste not want not" being what she'd've had chiselled on her gravestone, given the opportunity. The Old

posed, that they'd been on the winning side of whatever it was, but like every time TerraCom told you you'd won something, you were bound to be disappointed. Like being peddled a toxic sandlot out in the Maze on the promise of endless green acres of virgin ploughland. As lore had it, the drought came the day after the water concessions got corporatised. Which, the Semantix Twins tried to explain to him, had been the Commission's intention all along.

"First they broke the Insurrection, then they broke the Diggers who put it down. Shipped 'em off to the Frontier so they could choke on bulldust & pyroxene. Not much anyone can do about it way out 'ere. Winwin as the Yanks say."

Assmann didn't get it.

"Why'd they do such a thing?"

The Twins, who no-one could tell apart, gave him a look like a pair of comeys after they'd been flattened by a Belt-train.

"Dollars, stupid."

And Assmann wondered about that for a long time afterwards. *How'd being stuck at Wadi Creek make dollars for the Commission?*

Once they moved out to Yanergee, Assmann didn't need to wonder anymore.

Which meant, Assmann supMan'd grin at his eldest son from under the brim of his slouch-hat & say, "D'you know how ya can tell when it's cooked proper? Ya put a stone in the pot 'n' when the stone gets soft ya chuck out the 'goon 'n' eat the stone."

Not just Assmann's dad, but a lot of the fettlers still wore their Digger hats, from the Great Insurrection, which ended the year Assmann was born. Khaki roobat-felt with the right-side brim pinned up under the TerraCom insignia, a blazing solrise worked in polished manganese, where the rifle barrel would sit over your shoulder.

They called things "Great" when they affected everyone, except those who nothing ever affected. "Like them yobbos down at Mission Control," as the Old Man said, meaning the Terraform Commission & their crony mates, who switched policy for the sake of the next buck more times than Captain Thunderbolt'd tied a saddle. What the Great Insurrection had been about, Assmann didn't know, only that it was the reason for the camps & the soldier-resettlement programme that, in one of the Old Man's more sober turns of phrase, had turned to crap in a handbasin.

“Eeennnnnnnnnn,” Assmann^{2} groaned sickly, nursing its CryoSa© console, as if it alone was keeping the world from heaving down.

You get enough of that sort of thing & you never know where it’ll end.

Well anyone could see Assmann^{2}’d had the razz. It’d played the console till its fingers bled & made a voice like a cracked accordion, but for once the mission was bigger than it was.

“Eennndddd,” Assmann^{2} groaned again, when Assmann^{1} got close enough to the sac for his doppelganger to make a desultory grab at him, “of the wooooorld!”

Jerking back, Assmann^{1} bit the inside of his mouth. It tasted like there was ash under his skin.

“This world, or the next one?”

As if in response, his doppelganger pushed its mouth against the sac’s membrane & licked, its tongue looked like it needed a shave. Assmann^{1} felt chills of weird synchronicity.

“D’you even know what year it is,” he winced, “or doesn’t it matter anymore?”

Assmann^{2} stroked its keyboard, eyes rolling back in its head like some defibrillated thing. The console strobed. The cryo-goo palpitated.

I have previously made the distinction between two types of civilisation, calling one governmental & the other administrative. Only the second exists in Cydonia, the first being almost unknown. If the directing power in Martian societies was susceptible instead to the exercise of democratic prerogatives, then bureaucratic tyranny would soon be banished from the "New World." But on Mars the majority, though they are nominally opposed to the despotic tastes & instincts of Unelected Power, still lacks the instruments of collective consciousness to overthrow it. In all the Martian cities, a central authority regulates all aspects of society's concerns, & there is no indication it has even conceived the desire to do otherwise. The majority, ever-increasingly dissolute, has in no way impinged on the habits of Absolute Power; it has only made it appear all the more inevitable. Thus the language of democracy, while encountered everywhere, serves as nothing better than a placebo, & at worst an obfuscation of the true depths to which, in these far-flung colonies, enlightened humanity has sunk.

"Well you know what they say," Sal Volatile was telling them, though no-one showed any interest. A map glowed on the flight-room wall above the drone console. Assmann looked at it with an ironic fixity of expression, tilting his girlish head to one side. You turned Tharsis Rise upside-down, he thought, & you got a picture of a grinning one-eyed idiot.

It was October B. On the other side of the Sol System "the Amerikan Wall" still hadn't come down. Aliens invading would've been more believable, hahaha. In the co-pilot seat, Bogart was tapping on his armrest with a chewed felt-tip, Pink Floyd hissing from a cellotaped Walkman. *Dark Side of the Moon*. Oh yeah? Which fucking moon, whiteboy?

"You heard of Little Big Horn?"

"That what? Don Cherry?"

Sal Volatile, slouched at the trigger-station in an attitude of profound indifference, kept prating on about whatever he was prating on about. The end of the world, maybe. Whichever world he thought he was on. The red scarf he wore draped over his fatigues was smeared with formalin & engine grease. He'd spent the First Intifada in the guts of a drone with a monkey-wrench & now he couldn't give a shit if it was subproles or roobats they blew to bits out in the Maze.

Bogart ran the dead felt-tip across his screen & made the drone execute a series of farcical manoeuvres. Assmann tried not to grin. The Instructor hovered, unerringly, just behind his head. He could feel it, as if it were breathing quite purposely on his neck.

There was a faint whirring. Code flashed on his screen. Assmann looked down from the map, his eyes coming to rest on the Instructor's reflection. It made him think of some kind of beaked squid. He sensed its gaze resting on him with clear intent as he traced out vague Picassoid figures on the flight-path scheduliser. A kids' tune played through his head as he did so – something about a one-eyed, one-horned, flying purple people eater. Bogart had hacked in & put the squid on mute, to Assmann's eternal gratitude. Now it had to send messages via the console.

Sal Volatile, meanwhile, had started prating about his pension plan. Percentages. Contributions. Returns.

"I am officially shit-canning this operation," said Lamaisonblanche over the top of Sal's fifty-year-plan, tossing her headset on the console. It was her shift at the Command Station, which basically consisted in punching the crew's time-card & staying awake to authorise each strike on a kill-by-kill basis.

Assmann smelt Lamaisonblanche's deodorant as the redhead came across & leered over his shoulder, nudging the Instructor out of the way.

"Mmm," Lamaisonblanche breathed in his ear, "who's got a crush now, eh?"

The Instructor bleeped.

Assmann took Bogart's felt-tip & scribbled a black hole right in the middle of the screen. The drone spiralled sickly in on itself. Somewhere a bell rang. The simulation fritzed.

"Shit," Sal Volatile drawled. "I didn't even get to blow my load."

Lamaisonblanche yawned.

"Save it for after, bigboy."

The ennui in the flight-room became the ennui of leaving one airless box merely in order to return to another. The final exam was a month away. A month of sitting in a shoebox three shifts back-to-back to one shift off, playing video games "on general alert." After the exam you got detailed to a "HungerBeast" squad & went live in the Maze.

Not that there was any good reason for of it – the Intifada was just for ♂TV ratings, one of countless sequels. Sal said it was like training for *Sale of the Century*. "You just zap the shit out of anything that moves & make the story sound good later."

The Instructor followed Assmann to the hatchway.

"Blow," said Lamaisonblanche to the hover-ball. "This bitch is mine."

Assmann winced.

"Just what I need. How d'you know the goddamn thing isn't a dyke?"

The redhead winked.

"That's just what I'm hoping."

I awoke to find the walls trembling…

Through half-raised shutters, a slant of yellow Martian light transformed dustmotes to complex manifolds, turning in a gyre against the gridlines of airlock & vestibule. The seismograph flashed 4.3. Lulling into a false sense of security. Anything with numbers on it did. But it was the light that disturbed him. The pattern of it. Things turned like that only in presage of collapse, implosion, catastrophe.

Assmann dragged upright from his sleep module & checked the hydraulics. Ran through the parametrics. Another shock coursed through the HAB. 2 minutes 53 seconds. Whatever it was, was getting closer. The radar drew a blank. Also infrared. Not a heat signature for miles that wasn't just rock baking in the sun's radiation.

Cthuuuulm! No doubting it this time. The HAB tipped, stabilised. Assmann grabbed the console, punched the disengage sequence. Red flashed as red will. There was a sudden lurch as the retrorockets fired. 3 metres. 6 metres. 10. The gyros whined. Then the whole thing upended.

The detonation plume must've been a mile high. Three, four, a dozen of them, like mushrooms sprouting over the Ridge. And just as suddenly, sucked back down. Ridge-line collapsing under its own weight. Sheets of rock & bulldust raising a wall in the sky.

When everything cleared, there was a rough-hewn canyon where the Ridge had been. Here & there, bits of extruded steel from exploded bunkers, mineshafts, drone hives. The whole subterranean complex.

Dotting the landscape, soldier-settler HABs glinted faintly in the afternoon sun through a red fog that lingered through the coming days.

The HungerBeasts made prodigal roars, shouts that reverberated in a nimbus of bulldust, brainfog, candled mysticisms. Glint of eye, arc of blade: conductive bodies meshing to opaque screens. Assmann, pixel-eyed, bifocals angle-wise, navigated the laboratory gloom on hands & knees. The gyros whined. The shelves swayed, pendulum-analogue. Any moment the whole array'd start vibrating & cascading. Caged roobats mewled. Outside the Beasts could still be heard marauding through the dark. A stink of burned plastic cordite gasoline wafted through the vents. Another drone-burning party out on the Bridge.

In his present state it was a while before Assmann found the main hatch. Scorch marks all up the side of the airlock. Random tracer fire lit the northern skyline. Past the soylent pods, smoke was coming out of the Maze like ranks of yellowgrey trench-coats in lockstep. Puncturing the haze at intervals along the Beltway: rusted palm trees & concertina wire. A sulphurous wind spiralling through the ditches & mantraps.

Something bawled out there in the gloom. A machine confronting its death. Assmann crouched in the airlock, listening for HungerBeasts on the prowl. Invisible Beasts advancing with knives between their teeth. Suicide vests. Fuseless detonators. Mad Beasts ranting & thrashing. Shellshocked Beasts cowering in the junk-filled canals around starved candles, invoking spirits of sanctuary or revenge, reciting heavy Cthulu mantras. Creatures of myth, he'd never seen one in the flesh.

From the airlock, the sound of the wind's moaning grew louder. Drone-lights swept through the haze. As soon as it'd passed, Assmann staggered to the Beltway. A few metres on,

someone was lying there in a torn hazchem suit. It was the missing lab technician, Lamaisonblanche. Assmann knelt down & could hear her sobbing. The suit clung to her hips in a ridiculously complicated arrangement. In the airlock something got smashed. A roobat mewled. A minor chord stretched itself into an augmented ninth.

"They've gone," he whispered, but the words came back in a hopeless shudder.

Lamaisonblanche simply stared at him through a smashed respirator. Sand had started drifting down out of the haze, making tidelines in her hair, red as kilned clay. The air tasted of pyroxene.

Suddenly through the concertina wire a face appeared like a bloodied half-moon.

"NOW HEAR THIS!" the moon-face bellowed.

There was a hissing sound. Filaments of molten glass sprayed onto the Beltway.

Lamaisonblanche keened.

An echo came back through the fog & Assmann shivered.

A sliver of tusk. A palm tree sheered in half crashed to ground. The concertina wire sang. Drone-gust.

"THE BEAST, THE BEAST, THE BEAST!"

"HA, HA, FUCKING HA!" Lamaisonblanche screamed hysterically.

Assmann saw the red target-beam centre between her eyes. His own transponder flashed. But the decal on Lamaisonblanche's suit had been ripped apart by whatever had gotten her. The red light expanded into a liquid flash.

It was over before he realised what was happening.

Gradually the haze lifted. Dawn came slowly over Cydonia. Survivors stumbling one-by-one out of the landscape. Military traffic growling along the Beltway towards the frontier works.

The surveillance footage showed a half-naked unidentified male lying paralysed in an airlock floor while a group of uniformed officers raped him, one after another & sometimes simultaneously. Assmann watched the footage being looped through the news cycle as text commentary scrolled uninterrupted across the screen. Someone had turned the sound off. Meanwhile in some other part of the solar system, other things were presumably happening. Headlines rotated. The presenter's face blurred in & out of focus, barely even there. It was the surveillance footage that stuck in Assmann's mind. Even when he wasn't looking at the screen, it was all he saw. He was sitting in the Transit Zone, waiting. The airlock on the TV could've been anywhere. It was too ubiquitous, too familiar. The victim's face had been pixellated out. A gaussian blur stared back from the screen, its pixel eyes seeking his. Assmann recognised the uniforms, it would've been impossible not to. Finally an announcement came over the PA system. The redeye Cydonia shuttle, ready for boarding. A dull pain spread through Assmann's back as he stood to go to the boarding gate. But that was all.

Bogart used a double-barrel flare gun at the rear of the Cydonia Mine. He'd parked his sled on a rise, killed a half-flask of ethanol & lit his brains up. It took forensics a week to be sure it was him & not some switcheroo, the cops trading cop talk over the paper-cup ersatz you can't get anywhere but in a copshop – *Bang, there goes another arsehole*.

No-one loves a suicide downtown, clogs up the form-work, 'cause no-one ever believes it till they believe it. Just like they say, a suicide ain't no joy 'less you can pin it on a stooge – can't bust some dumb bastard who's copped-out, do time for shooting yrself in the head, hahaha.

Yeah, just another arsehole.

That year there was a run on arseholes. Try as they might, the TerraCom goons couldn't keep it off the tubes. The boys in the Statistical Bureau wanted it buried in a box labelled Inflation Adjustment, like it was all just an offset to the rocket-crash economy they called Mars Express. But a week didn't go by when you'd log-on without seeing a dead 'naut's mugshot in the top right corner of the screen.

Started calling the dump Sue-Cy City. As in, *Boy Called Suicide*, hahaha.

Bogart was third in line that year – first there was a Flight Instructor who made a neat enough job of it, dead already a week by the time Flight Control called to see why she wasn't in harness. They found her down in the crawlspace under the ventilation unit of her HAB, curled up in the bulldust & mite webs & smell of roobat piss, still in her blue jumpsuit, pretty much skin & bones by then. Officially it was chalked up as pyroxene, but pyroxene doesn't creep up on you with a fistful of downers & tie a plastic bag over your head.

Next was Sal, who nose-dived a personnel drone into the front of a semi on the NorthSouth Beltway. They tried to pass that one off as routine roadkill till a journo got hold of the story.

After Bogart there was Lamaisonblanche, who hanged herself in zero gravity up on Deimos, which took extraordinary skill & got transmitted live on the shipboard channels. No keeping that one off the news.

And then there was Assmann, whose death changed everything.

The Valiant was Bogart's mum's, she'd got it in the divorce. The Old Man was a drunk & a nutjob, did time in the Cydonia Penitentiary. When his term expired, the missus was long gone, took the kids & fucked off south. New address, new name. The lawyers took care of the rest. But the Old Man wasn't the type to just bury the hatchet, so it should've surprised no-one when one morning he turned up at the Ridge & went to work on the ex-wife's HAB with a can of ethanol & a box of safety matches. Earned him a life stretch on top of the domestic violence rap. Bogart & his kid twin brother (by 8 minutes exactly) had already left for Social Programming that morning, but Bogart's mum was sawing the air inside her module & got barbecued. They kept her in a vault somewhere at the Base Hospital plugged into a respirator, because that way the Health Department collected on the insurance. For their tenth birthday, Bogart & Sal got to be the legal custodians of a parental-analogue Social Programming drone in a one-room council HAB out on Paradise Bridge Estate, with a view of the soylent pods.

"These things come in cycles, Dr Assmann," the Detective Sergeant explained, unconvincingly.

They were standing beside the autopsy slab. Everything had been done by the book, but none of it added up. Dr Assmann stared glumly down at the corpse. Its open chest cavity gaped stupidly back at him. The brain-pan likewise. Nothing in either one. Nothing at all.

"It ain't natural," he said finally.

A pair of orderlies shuffled nervously by the door. It wasn't what anyone wanted to hear. Unnatural happenings meant quarantine. And quarantine was no fun at all.

"Better not to draw any hasty conclusions," the Detective Sergeant mumbled. "I read about this kind of thing happening before."

Dr Assmann squinted, then reached a pair of tweezers inside the skull & poked around where the brainstem should've been. He pulled out something smooth, flat & shiny.

"Ever seen anything like that before?"

The Detective Sergeant stared in surprise. Leant across to inspect the thing Dr Assmann held aloft in his tweezers. Recoiled in even greater surprise. The orderlies exchanged glanced, held their breath.

"Well?"

"Well," the Detective Sergeant hesitated, "it looks like..."

But he never had a chance to say exactly what it *did* look like, because before he could, he too had vanished without a trace.

"Tut-tut," Dr Assmann clicked his tongue, securing the flat shiny object in a specimen jar.

The two orderlies looked visibly relieved.

"Why do you think he said that?" Dr Assmann turned to them, almost as if expecting a reply. They froze, their eyes alone mobile, tracking patterns in the hospital lino. "Come in cycles. Cycles. Have you ever heard anything quite so ridiculous?"

The day the HungerBeasts tried to torch the Cydonia Depot put paid to all that. The police report attributed it to a few bad apples. The liberal media painted it as the actions of psychologically disturbed ’nauts who’d been failed by the System. No-one was surprised. You sent crews into the Maze on double-shifts & overtime, something crazy was bound to happen.

A landscape emptied of presiding motif, was how Col Farrell described it to him once, but Col Farrell had been a poet, only now he was dead, a grin sliced into his face from ear to ear by the Slav's razor.

"Poetic justice," his mum had said.

Assmann gazed out over the blood-red sandlots thinking about what a landscape was supposed to be, some kinda picture, while his mum complained about the clonefruit thieves, sneaking into her garden at night to steal clonefruits.

She'd been out there all morning in a hazchem suit injecting the clonefruits that were still left on the trees with magnesium sulphate. So if the thieves came back to eat any more of those clonefruits, they'd shit themselves to death.

Lamaisonblanche swung from the airlock, gurgling into her coms till there was nothing left to gurgle with.

"What're you doing?" Sal's ghost blinked up from behind six inches of bloodied fringe.

"What're *you* doing?" Lamaisonblanche leered back, the harness straining at her neck like a bungee cord. She'd jammed the hatch, but the pressure was so fast equalising that it was all over in a blink. Time did that whisper-in-the-ear thing, while she did whatever she had to, not to throw up. It felt like she had the bends. Was this what being dead was really like?

"Hey, look, nearly the whole gang's here," Sal grinned.

Lamaisonblanche gagged. Jesus, someone must've gotten inside her head & was fucking with the dream settings. This couldn't be real. She blinked. The airlock was suddenly glowing. Bogart, with two fiery red eyes, came out from behind her, executing a slow-mo triple axle in the zero gravity.

"Well it seems like fun now, but wait a few days & the shine kinda comes off the whole deal, haha."

Lamaisonblanche gave him one of those looks. Bogart pulled up beside her.

"Decided to hang out with us for a while, eh?"

Her audible groan sent faint ripples along the bungee cord.

"Is that *Assmann*?" Sal pointed at something coming out of the blackness, a look of confusion disfiguring what was left of his face.

Bogart for once was speechless.

With difficulty, Lamaisonblanche turned to see. At first she couldn't be sure what it was. It was a truly repugnant sight. But as it drifted closer, she knew.

“Won’t catch me doin’ anythin’ that dumb,” Assmann’d said, some time between the end of the ethanol jar & the beginning of the formalin jar. “You get hitched, may as well just slip-on a castration ring & wait for your nuts to drop off in your sleep.”

He’d spout something like that & without batting an eye make all sweet with the console, tuning a righteous groove out of the electronics & putting enough honey in his voice to drown a queen bee.

Baby I’m lookin’ for a woman to share my pain, ’cause I ain’t nothin’ but a weak man.

Yeah I’m nothing but a weak weak man.

Mmm, oh yeah, I’m lookin’ for a woman who can share my pain, ’cause I’m nothin’, oh no no baby I ain’t nothin’, but a weak weak weak ma-a-an…

The "Tharsis Rise" Superette dragged past on the left – anticipating by 4,000 miles at least. But who was going to argue when there was nothing except the Maze lying ahead till you got to the far end, if you ever did? The Superette was really just a corrugated tin shack with a couple of bowsers & a dust-red radio dish, like some outback simulacrum someone had gone to great lengths to fabricate, in the most authentic setting imaginable. It sold half-expired ration packs & bonded 'Berg & reconstituted protein fillets in saturated batter, garpfish & souvlakis. The last bit of civilisation for ten days.

The Valiant slalomed through the rutted bulldust, past the turnback. Then without further preamble they were out on the flats. Sal gazed morosely at the rustbrown landscape with dusk hanging over it. HungerBeast country. The only cholesterol you were likely to find out there, was you, being roasted over a 40-gallon drum, like the old timers said.

Bogart steered the clapped-out Valiant off the Beltway at the Big-T junction, socalled because it was the only road west to Tharsis Rise. The chimneystacks at the Cydonia Mine sent up pale slivers of smoke rising straight then sheering off at altitude by the northerly jetstream. In the lee of which, all remained still, unperturbed. They swung a left past the War Memorial then right onto a dirt track across a stretch of baked clay with ore-weeds knitting a perimeter of rusted chainlink. Past that was nothing but acres of withered soylent pods in the sulphur haze that hung forever over the Depot.

Sloping north a couple of hundred yards below the chainlink huddled an enclave of dun-coloured HABs, an old ganger colony for the Beltway extension before the budget got cancelled. A half-constructed flyover stood marooned over a wadi. Paradise Bridge. The Bridge to Nowhere. The sun was slanted low enough for the huge construction to appear suspending in its light.

The Valiant groaned as they came to a stop.

Tilted against the nearest HAB was a windmill, SOUTHERN CROSS painted in faded black up there on the tail-fin or whatever it was called. Despite half the blades being gone, it still managed to turn whenever there was a breeze, as there was now, a hot thin draught coming across the flats, faintly stirring the dust. The sound of old tech was the first thing Sal heard when Bogart killed the engine outside the gate – the banging of a crankshaft in a borehole, the wheeze & slosh.

The engine ticked as they climbed out into the heat. The air smelled of effluent from the soylent pods. Like the carpet in

the front bar at the Central Hotel. A pangoon perching on a fence-post eyeballed them. A flock of roobats made calligraphy against the dusk. Bogart leant against the driver's side door & lit a cigarette. Past the chainlink, where the dirt track continued down to the wadi, a comey was chewing lichen with a couple of pangoons on its back, nestled in its fur. Bogart reached inside the Valiant & sounded the horn, once, twice. The comey raised its head & watched them for a moment then went back to its grazing. The sun slipped below the pylons.

Sal unzipped his flight-jacket & stuffed his hands in his jeans, toeing the yellow lichen with his boots impatiently. In all the years they'd been coming here, he'd never seen anyone do a single day's work on the Bridge. The dunes just kept on accumulating, narrowing the gap. If the colony didn't do something to keep the dunes at bay, it wouldn't be too long before the whole place got swallowed. There'd been talk about the HungerBeasts dynamiting it, as if they'd be bothered. But it meant TerraCom paid the colonists to stay put, as if that were any kind of deterrent. More likely they'd all die of boredom. He reached in through the front window of the Valiant & grabbed a bottle of 'Berg from the glovebox. Unscrewed it & took a swig.

Somewhere inside the HAB-with-the-windmill a hatch banged. Then a light went on over the airlock & the silhouette of a woman came down the steps towards them. Bogart watched her approach through the descending gloom while he smoked another cigarette. After a while, Lamaisonblanche stood in front of them in an unzipped hazchem suit. Bulldust had congealed on the sweat around her neck & the front of her singlet.

"Did you hear about Assmann?" she said.

Bogart looked blank.

"It just came over the frequency. They're saying he blew up the cryo-tanks."

Sal nodded & took another swig of the 'Berg. He was democratic, he didn't give a damn who wanted to blow things up.

Lamaisonblanche did something with her face that Sal would've described as frantic. Bogart didn't even seem to be listening, his gaze had drifted down to where the perimeter lights had come on, catching the metallic glimmer of the wadi's crusted bed. The twin moons had begun to rise in synchronicity with the setting sun. Sand drifts churned over the weir.

"You know what that means, don't you?" Lamaisonblanche said in a voice brewing with emotion.

Bogart just shook his head, dropped his butt on the ground & stepped on it.

III

[SPIRA MIRABILIS]

"We have invented special technical names for this phenomenon," explained engineer Lewis A. Assmann to the members of the Committee for Gravity-Annulment

First the landing strip. Then the black dust-cloud parting on the Cydonia sprawl, flattened out against the plateau. A montage of pathless reflections, veils of light bleeding into darker precincts. At its core, peeling from the Dome, a dozen giant construction arms in constant if indiscernible motion. Like a floating Medusa.

Assmann took his Little Red Book from the compartment & tore out a half-stub of blotted yellow paper with a smileyface stamped on it. Ration cards. Comintern Labs Pty Ltd. He washed the half-stub down with stale coffee, his third in eight hours. The effects were waning. Without even having to think to do so, his IQ-app plotted a statistical downcurve, projecting it on the console. It flashed green, tapering off into a parabola, he supposed. Or hyperbola. Words from a dead language he didn't even know the name of. His labcoat slackened. Even with such diminishing returns the dematerialisation was noticeable. He flexed his fingers so as not to lose track of where they were on the keyboard & typed: RUN TEST SIMULATION 3.0. Hit return & leaned back into the spreading liquid folds of his module. The transition wasn't immediate. At first, impossible to be sure there'd been any transition at all. Only the decal pulsing on his coat lapel told him he was still there.

Out in the Maze, not seeing the sky for weeks at a time, canyons a hundred miles deep. You kept dug-in, sensors scanning the formations for HungerBeasts. Assmann lay in the cleft with a drone tethered to the gauntlet of his glove like a falcon waiting to be unhooded & set upon its prey. His earpiece hissed.

"Toad at three o'clock."

He swivelled his periscope. Zero.

"Sensors must be glitched," he said. "Nothing but red rock."

"It's gaussed," Lamaisonblanche's voice hissed back. "ComSec keeping eyes on us."

"Sonsofbitches. They'll give our position away."

"Working on it."

Assmann zoomed. Suddenly the ComSec bot shimmered into view. It was perched right out on a ridge of banded iron ore. Degaussed it looked just like a hunched bullfrog with black warts all over it. Psycho stealth capabilities. The peep-squad at HQ must've thought they were being real smart. Assmann was half-tempted to fry the fucker. But he no sooner thought it, than the toad atomised right there in the scope, all by itself.

"Holy shit! Did you see that?"

Lamaisonblanche was silent. Assmann zoomed hard, but the toad was just bits of free-floating molecules settling into dust. He tapped his earpiece. Nothing.

"You there?"

"Sure I'm here," a voice answered from above the cleft.

Assmann pulled his head away from the scope & squinted. A face swathed in mottled rags grinned down at him. It was the first Beast Assmann had seen with his own eyes. Yet strangely, it looked familiar. He didn't need to see the Beast's gun to know one was pointed at him. But that wasn't the problem.

The problem, as far as Assmann could see, was that, except for the rags, the Beast looked just like him. Exactly like him. It could've *been* him.

Assmann stared into the Beast's eyes wondering what was supposed to happen next. The drone on his wrist whirred out a stream of code & fell silent. *Two of you*.

"The least you could do," the Beast said, stepping fully into the light, "is act pleased to see me."

Assmann awoke with a moth in his mouth.

Assmann woke up, a moth in his mouth.

Assmann woke up a moth in his mouth.

Assmann awoke, a moth, in his mouth.

Assmann woke with a moth's mouth.

Assmann woke up a moth with his mouth.

Assmann awoke inside a moth's mouth.

Assmann awoke in the moth in his mouth.

The giant ventilators made a high whining sound like a rockdrill through quartzite, audible all the way across the plateau. Standing out under the big sky, Assmann felt as if his brainpan had been opened up & he was breathing with his mind. Warm air caressing the grey matter. Bulldust settling into the creases. He tipped the last of the water from the dented canteen onto his hair, feeling the shock of it work down his neck. It was only ten more clicks to the Depot & something was bound to come along the Beltway before then. He'd been wandering days unassisted through the scrub with a queerly unerring sense of direction. Landmarks in the sky. You could look up & the same pattern of yellow haze would be drifting toward the same point on the horizon unchanged hour after hour, turning to faint auroras during the night. The only thing that shifted was the terrain, like someone had hacked all the X,Y coordinates on a game console to make an Ariadne's Thread through the Maze, left for Assmann to follow for reasons he had no way of imagining. It'd all begun with the crash. They'd come down in HungerBeast country between Cydonia & Tharsis Rise. He'd come-to in a daze, alone, on a rift & begun walking. No sign of the wreck. No coms. Just a ration pack & the canteen on his hip. After nearly a week he heard the ventilators & knew the Depot was close by. Not once, in all that time, did he suspect it was just a test.

Once there'd been subterranean languages, underground forces, subprole bandwidths down the mineshafts, vulcanised echoes of troglodyte burrowings, HungerBeast redoubts, enclaves of secret resistance. Now they shuttled-in the tourist trade, shelling-out Earth Dollars to slum it in the catacombs. Five-star military escort service. Fully catered. Lascaux-chic.

"Resonant logic," she said.

Lamaisonblanche pressed the decal to the side of her head & the jelly pulsed. A red flush spread across her high cheekbones. The skin tremored.

"Are you sure it's safe?"

Her eyelids drooped, but Assmann knew she was still awake. Jellies were on the prohibited biological index.

"Suck yer brain right outa yer head," Bogart leered.

It made Assmann feel like an idiot for having said anything at all. Lamaisonblanche had offered him one, but he'd demurred, afraid the scanners would pick it up on him.

"Here," Sal reached out a bottle of 'Berg.

Assmann took a slug & passed the bottle back over. His oesophagus burned, not unpleasantly.

"That stuff'll rot yer balls off," Bogart opined.

Lamaisonblanche's face had all slipped to one side & she was drooling contentedly down her chin. It made Assmann self-conscious just looking at her. The decal had stopped pulsing. Was the thing still inside there, or was it inside *her* now, doing stuff?

"Why don't you find out?" Bogart grinned.

He was holding an endoscope.

Assmann recoiled.

He came closer.

From the top of the landfill, when there was no haze, it was possible to see all the way out to Paradise Bridge. Not today, though, the sky was totally gaussed. Assmann had to content himself with contemplating the dance movement of the drone swarms working the clone-fruit plantation just past the perimeter. They made weird choreography that left his mind blank of any other association than the ever-shifting arrangement of junk the nanobots had erected on the landfill. One day, this monument to entropy might be all that remained.

"Posterity does what it will," said Lamaisonblanche, intuiting his thoughts.

He was impressed that anyone could use the word posterity in a place like this. It was reassuring somehow. The old illusions weren't going to give in so easily after all.

Even as the uterine tremors of the CryoSa© rippled around him, it bemused Assmann[2] to think how, when they finally woke him at the end of the journey, it really would be a life-&-death situation.

The odds against it were steep, but Assmann was all but certain they'd transitioned from the Cydonia brane to some other brane that hadn't been mapped before. Everything still *appeared* the same except that the more you looked the more the details digressed. By the time they came within sight of the Maze, they were experiencing full-on anamorphosis. The scout drones hung flat against the sky. Dunes layered a cut-out distance a child could've drawn on a wall with bits of crayon. HungerBeasts perched atop periscopes, ogling them. Roobats lay out on the bluffs in an ethanol haze, flapping leathery wings & laughing crazily. Piles of junk seemed to animate, self-assembling into mobile disasters. Without warning, Assmann's crew were all sucked down into quicksand. Bulldust settled back over the subsidence as if they'd never been there. An entirely rational panic was quick in overcoming him. Last man standing, Assmann spread-eagled, clutching the ground so as not to get sucked into some other dimension. Dustmotes sparkled in the low Martian gravity. Dusk glowed over him. Night fell. Assmann lay there alone, afraid that if he attempted radio contact, he'd give the game away.

The four of them slid around the floor like ungainly figure-skaters, their hazchem boots glowing on the frictionless parquet. Baroque arches, hanging tapestries, tasselled lampshades, settees, the oceanic baize of an antique snooker table.

Bogart, half-drunk, pinballed off the walls, careening into furniture that instantly righted itself.

Sal was more circumspect, uncharacteristically aware of the effort it required to move his feet in a singular co-ordinated fashion.

He gazed down, an electron storm was dancing up his legs in a satire of blue disco motion. *Saturday Night Fever* on the inflight entertainment system.

Sal's reflex was to reach for the remote-control & change the channel, when just then Assmann & Lamaisonblanche came sweeping into view doing their Torvill & Deane act.

Laimaisonblanche had just told Assmann that she was a Xenoafrist. His only response was to blink at her stupidly. It was all he could do to conceal the true depth of his incomprehension. Perhaps she'd gone insane, he thought. It was a distinct possibility. It was her third tour in the Maze, after all. Almost no-one made a full three tours without recording at least one episode.

Assmann made a note in the file.

When he looked up, Lamaisonblanche was even more agitated than before. She was drumming the arms of the interview chair with her claws. She was leaning so close to the camera that her face had the appearance of pressing against the inside of his monitor. In the background of what must've been a retrofitted cargo pod, Assmann could make out the shape of a ComSec drone. He wondered if the drone could hear their conversation.

"Xenoafrism," Lamaisonblanche hissed, "is the path of righteous truth."

Assmann, massaging his Medical Officer's decal, forced himself to smile in encouragement. A manic intensity had crept into Lamaisonblanche's voice. Much more & the algorithms would trigger a subroutine in the drone & her frequency would be jammed. *Placed under sedation*, as the Operating Manual so quaintly put it.

There was something, he realised, that she was desperately trying to explain to him. About the slaves. How they weren't really slaves at all, but secret agents of transmigration, who'd exploited First World tech to mass-colonise Mars surreptitiously.

"How do you think we *got* here?" she hissed.

Something in Lamaisonblanche's face glitched. The thought passed through Assmann's mind that the image on his screen might really be a construct. One of those tests being run by TerraCom to weed-out seditious activity. But then, if she was real, how would she know that *he* wasn't a construct? Why was she even talking to him?

"You think I'm nuts?" the console said.

Assmann watched the drone-shape grow more definite over Lamaisonblanche's shoulder.

She winked.

"More of us than them, doc."

Her eyes drifted off-centre. He was sure she was tracking the drone's reflection in the monitor at the other end.

"One day soon," she hissed lower, "gonna hack the System. Bring every one of those fuckers down. Boom. For real."

Then, before he could speak, Assmann felt a sharp prick in the back of his neck. There was a faint whirring sound. He couldn't move. Something, he was sure of it, was hovering behind him, just out of view. Something. Hovering. Out of. View.

“Monkey without a cause,” a voice said. And it occurred to him: *Those could be the last words you ever hear.*

The phenomenon was traceable to the Great Cartesian Event, before the Species Convergence Singularity which bridged the division between all presently known vertibrates with well-defined cerebral cortices & their more or less theoretical progenitors, that'd up until then evolved without. At some point in the Late Mesozoic, jellyfish-like "brains" were believed to have grafted themselves parasitically onto one species after another of these quasi-vertebrates, not unlike hermit crabs inhabiting a living shell, thereby inaugurating a process of co-evolution that, over millions of years, eventually produced a unified organism defined by mind/body duality: the *Spira Mirabilis*. It was what evolutionary biologists were now referring to as "the missing link." The specimen on Assmann's screen was almost perfect. Its intelligence was unnervingly palpable. Even separated by untold degrees of digital technology, the creature seemed *aware* of him. Assmann enlarged the image & leant in to get a better look. The pixels shimmered.

IV

[SEMANTIX]

Hello Doctor, there's something "strange," "kooky," very hardly explicable, going on when it comes to "technology," don't you agree? Maybe I should show you something. I don't know, it just seems that at times there are "gaps" in the world where it's as if different spheres have "hacked into it," different "logics," different "intelligences" maybe, ones which we just don't understand... Maybe I should show you something. If it's so, however, I don't feel capable of deciphering its "messages." So far, at least, I haven't been able to.

(Letter to Dr L. Assmann,
from Patient X,
Cydonia Neurolepsia Clinic)

Once again they were captive to that mindless fascism of the Dream. Collateral descendants of some prototype, who'd marched in lockstep down the first Synaptic Beltways, genuflecting to the Neural Shroud.

"GOD IS GREAT!" they chanted.

The encephalograph surged. Spectral currents of ionic flux.

Assmann cast his eye across the symbols on the screen. Awake the world was not so sublime as this cascade of syncopated babelspeak. Yet with a single line of code he could've harvested the entire collective consciousness in its sleep.

He did not smile. The prospect offered no enticements. It would've been a barren harvest.

Four hours a day with his head in a bucket of water staring at a black line, was how Lamaisonblanche described it & Assmann couldn't help but agree it was true, up to a point. But that hadn't stopped him craving it, first thing when he woke up & last thing before he went to sleep. Throughout the mission preparations, it was all he could think about when he wasn't doing it & when he was doing it, it was the only time he felt really free to think about everything else. Like the astronaut training programme. Ignition routines. Gravitons. Hibernation schedules. And rendezvous. The Flight Instructor said if there was anyone who could turn basic addition & subtraction into a three-body problem, it was probably him. They called him Buzz & set him hypotheticals even the onboard AIs glitched, which he did in his head while counting off laps at the Spaceport Aquarium. Every day, six-till-eight & four-till-six: frogstroke, backstroke, butterfly & crawl. And every night eight hours solid he dreamt about the red planet.

Assmann'd barely been old enough to talk when the last Apollo moon rocket blasted into space atop eight million pounds of thrust, but that didn't stop him wanting to be THE FIRST MANWOMAN ON MARS. A cut-out of Cernin, Evans & Schmidt he'd glommed from his Old Man's stash of *Orbital Geographic* held pride of place in a thick scrapbook he'd filled with proverbial space junk: "Wohnrad" stations, moon-base arcologies, life-support systems, Bigelow satellite complexes, landing vehicles, command modules, launch & descent trajectories, Schiaparelli's canal maps, orbital recon pics & the very first real-life panoramas beamed back from Vikings 1 & 2: composite boulder-strewn deserts under yellow Martian skies. Young Assmann knew in his marrow that one day he'd plant the first bootprint & pretty soon the frontier folk would follow suit, blazing a trail for the rest of humankind. He figured on setting down with a modest-size ranch in view of Olympus Mons, where the snows would catch the light like nowhere else in the whole wide solar system. That & raise a few generations of his own, hardy Mars-folk – who knew, maybe even a son to make him proud like he'd make *his* old man proud, carry on the name, grow up to be the first Martian president, get his face on the Martian dollar bill.

Such was the substance of Assmann's lucubrations as he stood half in daydream under the hot fine jets of spray propulsing off his swimming cap. Thacketathacketathacketathack. His reverie was cut short by someone next to him poking his ribs. It was Sal Volatile, in a pair of red Speedos, grinning at something across the shower room. An extremely fat man was splayed back on one of the benches. He'd hoisted his gut over to one side & now proceeded with unnerving deliberation to excavate his foreskin with his pinkie fingernail. Assmann stared in wonderment.

"Mary, Mary, short & hairy..." Sal Volatile sang out.

The fat man diligently persisted in his excavations, oblivious. Assmann grabbed his towel & edged towards the lockers. A cloud of steam wafted after him.

The object in the sky looked like a crashed polyhedron. The Beasts sat out on the veldt peering up at it, as upon some remote cosmic catastrophe. A rogue gravitational force passing through the Oort, perhaps. Constellational parallax. A flashback to the creation event. Who knew? Some called it déjà voodoo. Cinema borealis. An interstellar demolition job on a five or fifty or five-hundred year replay. Optical time-travel. The Beasts muttered. Huddled over their calibrations. Swigged turps. Fired random salvos into the regular flightpath of the southwest patrols. Or straight up at the orbital station. Or Deimos. Or the crashed thing itself, whatever it was, countless parsecs out of range. Or just blindly into space for no good reason at all. Their raid on the Cydonia Depot had yielded a glut of munitions it now seemed their intent to drunkenly squander. Agents of chaos, they cleaved to their role in the Great Scheme of Things. Yin to the corporations' yang. It was what their leaders were paid for. It was why the Clinics secretly dumped them in the Maze on nights like this. Recycled human entropy driving the engine of progress. They knew what to expect. They'd been there, on the other side, drone pilots for the most part, before the Syndrome. What was left of them, physically, mentally, after the reprogramming gulags, had been cast into the wilds with a gun & a beacon, to choke on bulldust & pyroxene. Drone-fodder. HungerBeasts. Their tribes scattered with the winds & vaguer currents of vengeance or blood money. Garbled transmissions lured them to the ephemeral prize of an unguarded transport, or an ambush. Some begged at the outposts. Others scratched subsistence from the poisoned ground, evading the patrols, slaves to attrition. Assmann[2] peered at the thing in the sky & knew the true enemy was within, but not how to defeat it. A cold wind blew sheer over the veldt. Roobats howled across the night. The barely audible *pock-pock* of invisible drones strafing the Maze. The firefly-blinking of the satellites.

The season was late: Month 22/November B. There was already drift-ice south of the Canyons. At that time of the Year our Navigation would be uneasie & dangerous. Upon our arrival at Erythraea there was need of conducting repairs. At such climes, even the gyros could not be relied upon. It was necessary to divide the partie, so as to maintain a base with our drones, the rest to proceed over the Nectaris massif. I would have willingly trac'd the Canyons up to their Source, if several Obstacles had not stood in our way. The Wind, which stood then in the North, caused us to proceed directly in the ascent for three days to a ridge that lay fortie Leagues off. Before we got at any beaten or level Path, we were forc'd to continue our climb up three Mountains, upon which an hundred Beasts might have knock'd us all on the head with stones. For there had been sightings of these savage tribes from the moment we exeunted the Canyons thereby to seek a Passage southwest.

Lamaisonblanche thumbed the dog-eared corner of the manila file. The last case officer to review its contents had clocked-off fifty years ago. It'd lain in the Morgue ever since. They'd sent her down on her first day after transfer from the Maze. Some egghead's idea of rehab. A desk-job with no prospects. The Morgue was where they archived all the cold cases. Time-expired, unsolvable, of no interest to anyone. And by all accounts, the case file in front of her was one of the coldest. It concerned what the newspapers at the time called THE MYSTERIOUS EXPEDITION OF PROFESSOR LEWIS ASSMANN.

On the face of it, it should've been just another missing persons job. Except it wasn't. Even while the case was still warm, there'd been doubters on the Bureau who questioned whether the so-called professor ever existed at all.

At the heart of the mystery was an unattested claim, sworn-out by two junior flight officers. Identical twins. They'd been picked up by a recon mission in the Valles Marineris. According to their separate accounts, they were the Expedition's sole survivors. The transcripts were sent up the chain of command where they were immediately classified. An inquiry was initiated, while the rescued officers were placed in quarantine. According to the officers' subsequent testimony before the commission of inquiry, this "Professor Assmann" had, during the height of the southern winter of 1972, led a small exploration party far west of the Maze into uncharted Siren country.

They claimed, in fact, to've reached coordinates that would've placed them below the 45th parallel, at Frobenius – a generation, Lamaisonblanche noted, before the first drone survey. Supposedly a satellite had picked up indicators of subterranean geological activity in the region. The true objective, however, was known solely to the Professor. It was only when threatened with mutiny in the ranks, as the Expedition's fuel supplies ran low, that he'd at last revealed to them his theory about a "lost outpost." Pre-Tharsin. A satellite had picked up primitive radio signals. Buried in the noise, Assmann had heard voices. The decrypt algorithms confirmed it. The language was unknown, but it *was* language.

Pre-Tharsin? Lamaisonblanche pulled up a chart of the region. Nothing down there but craters, ice floes, tundra. She typed in a search query: nada. The place was officially TERRA NULLIUS – always had been. She zoomed in on the chart. A swathe of pixels obscured any landform detail there may've been. But Frobenius was only as far as they'd *claimed* to've reached. Who knew where the Professor's radio signals *actually* came from. If they'd come from anywhere. If there were any radio signals to begin with. *If there was even any Professor*. The only thing beyond doubt was that the twins had been found stranded in the Maze. *What about their flight data?* she thought.

Lamaisonblanche scanned back through the file. Strange. No navigation charts. No datasets. No transponders. No blackbox. Their vehicle was marked as UNRECOVERABLE. All the file contained were the two officers' signed statements, service records, a hand-drawn map of their intended route, & a logbook, apparently belonging to the Professor, whose last entry was dated just before he'd vanished in a blizzard, along with three other expedition members. The remaining crew, apart from the twins, perished on the return journey, under circumstances marked

AMBIGUOUS. (Someone had scribbled CANNIBALISM? in red ink in the margin. Lamaisonblanche pondered. 1972? She'd been sixteen back then. As far as she knew, that was when the first HungerBeasts were sighted in the Maze. Coincidence? What if. Not cannibalism. But...?)

Lamaisonblanche shook her head. She could've done with some caffeine, but the dispenser was on the blink. Her head was starting to ache. The Morgue stank of dust, mildew, roach bait & formalin. Christ only knew what kind of stuff they had percolating in jars down there. She checked the clock. Still five hours left on the shift. She scanned the room for CCTV, so she could flip someone the bird, even if it was just a surveillance algorithm. Nothing doing. Just filing cabinets, mesh cages bulging with paperwork slowly composting to starch, reels of celluloid, floppydiscs, magnetic tape, boxes of microfiche, harddrives stacked in totemic arrangements poised to cascade under the slightest application of force.

She hunched in resignation, angled the desklamp closer over the Assmann file. Everything about it bothered her. It should've been a simple matter of typing a few search terms into an engine & voilà, case solved. Someone must've at least run a check on Frobenius since then. Hell, the whole planet had been drone-surveyed with every kind of tech imaginable, down to the micro-millimetre, looking for stuff to dig up. Even if Assmann's expedition had left so much as a dirty syringe out there, it would've shown on a readout sometime in the last fifty years. She dialled the Mineralogical Bureau & ran a check on their server. It was camels-&-haystacks stuff. After a couple of hour's sifting the graphs, the impression she got was that Frobenius was perhaps the least interesting place, from a resource point of view, in the entire solar system. Nothing to see here folks. Like it'd been scrubbed clean. Just for the heck of it, she ran a search on ASSMANN. The system came up with dozens, none attached to any kind of scientific institution in 1972 though. Maybe the "Professor" bit was phoney. She accessed the TerraCom personnel logs. There was a Luděk Azzmann in "Sanitation," but that was it. Mmm.

Lamaisonblanche noted it down anyway. At least it'd fill up the timesheet, if nothing else. The case'd been cold this long, they could hardly give her heat for not producing results. But even so, she couldn't help feeling there was something more. The case read too much like something straight out of *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*. Which was exactly how it'd been reported back in the day, once the word got out. LOST EXPEDITION. RESCUED PILOTS. SECRET MISSION. MYSTERY BEYOND THE MAZE.

The whole developing saga had made front-pages for a week before the Commission buried it, apparently. A dozen press clippings had been duly bagged by someone running a follow-up. Lamaisonblanche tried to remember if she'd ever heard anything about it, but drew a blank. Funny. According to the case notes, the twins were sent up to a medical facility in Cydonia, where their story ended. Either they were mad, Lamaisonblanche figured, & it was a cover-up. Or they weren't, & it was a cover-up. The case stank. Was that why the archivist in the blue smock had given it to her, on her first day down in the Morgue? Was it supposed to be some sort of initiation rite? A joke? Or was someone sending her a message?

Bogart & Sal Volatile were sitting at their usual spot behind Paradise Bridge, backs to the sun, watching the evening gradually invade the picture. It wasn't so much nightfall as nightrise, a darkness growing up from the ground. Hemlock sky. No doubt there were numerous other ways to describe the same thing. For a while this thought caused Bogart anxiety. Sal was too busy levelling a flagon of 'Berg to be bothered with dissecting Bogart's metaphors. Roobats began to yowl out on the periphery. Under the Bridge, the dead river snaked blackly. Dead time. The giant reactor turbines glinted in the last of the light. Giant snails dissolving in black slime. The savage planet.

Our analysis concludes that HungerBeasts, though a distinct sub-species, have contributed approximately 1-4% of the genome of current non-Tharsin populations, while some pre-Martians living about 50 generations ago, in isolated Terran-settlements established independently of Tharsis in the far-east, have been found to've possessed between 6-9% HungerBeast DNA. The evidence we have of HungerBeast-modern Martian interbreeding sheds new light on the periodic migration of modern Martians out of Tharsis & the relative distribution of non-Tharsin hominid populations during the 1st Intermediate. These discoveries refute many previous hypotheses in which techno-anatomically modern Martians replaced archaic hominids, like HungerBeasts, without any miscegenation. However, even with some interbreeding between modern Martians & several now-extinct hominid sub-species during the 1st Intermediate "bottleneck," the vast majority of our genome still derives from Tharsis. Notably, HungerBeasts couldn't have contributed to modern Tharsin peoples' genomes because HungerBeasts evolved & lived exclusively in Cydonia & therefore couldn't have bred with those Martians living in Tharsis at that time. For many years, the only evidence of Martian-HungerBeast hybridisation existed within modern Martian genes. However, in 1972 researchers published a new set of HungerBeast DNA sequences from Noctis Labyrinthus, between Valles Marineris & the Tharsis upland, as well as from Melas & Coprates, that show evidence of Martian-HungerBeast interbreeding as far back as 100 generations ago – farther than many previous estimates of Martian migration out of Tharsis. Their findings are the first to show Martian gene flow into the HungerBeast genome as opposed to HungerBeast DNA into the Martian genome. This data tells us that not only were Martian-HungerBeast interbreeding events more frequent than previously thought, but also that an early migration of Martians did in fact leave Tharsis before the population that survived & gave rise to all contemporary non-Tharsin modern Martians.

The Semantix Twins stood at the edge of the Hole & looked down. A silver sheen dissected by strips of blue light descending into vertigo. There was no telling where it ended, or where it began. The view back was like a mirror. How they'd arrived at the joining place was unspecified. Or rather, vague. Indeterminate. They couldn't remember. One thing had merged into another. Carrousels, elevators, Beltways, labyrinths. Now this. Everything *as if* of its own accord. Or, in other words, according to some master-plan. "Do you know where we are?" they asked one another in unison.

The Old Man of Olympus Mons, escarpment-faced, the storm of Time rages through him, lacerating the sky with iron claw, exposing the raw ions, the eons of dark matter, the frozen cores of dead reactors adrift on solar winds. BY NAMING THEM YOU WILL OWN THEM, the Old Man's voice boomed. Assmann jerked awake & his reflection jerked awake also. Rheum-eyed. BY NAMING THEM… The words echoed once & vanished, but not without a trace.

Assmann groaned. Nothing depressed him more than such fugitive evidence of unconscious life. Nothing, perhaps, than the obligation to write it down. Doctor's orders. "They catch you hallucinating down there, son, they'll send you to the Clinic faster than you can spit. Best kind of insurance is hard evidence. Record everything. Places, times. Keep it to the facts. But don't leave anything out." Sure. The Doctor had built a celebrated career out of not leaving out any of the facts of other people's mental alienation. Maybe that was him in the dream? The Old Man. Author of vast & obscure literatures. *It all begins as garbage & then refines itself into art*. Had *he* said that?

The shaft jolted violently. Assmann detached his harness from the guywire & let himself drift along the steel umbilicus between pod & cargo bay. He could see the tremors moving through the shell. The whole rig was on a constantly varying pressure gauge. Each competing atmosphere like a world set on collision course barely averted.

At that moment, the rig was suspended somewhere between Lagrange points, in a moveable transit zone. A membrane of disequilibrium. The shaft spiralled around him as Assmann drifted towards the pod-bay airlock. He typed in the code, got jolted through. *By naming them*, he murmured, no longer sure why. A glitch under the tongue. He pulled himself into harness, stared blankly at the console. There was something he was supposed to write down, but he couldn't remember what. *I was never any good at numbers*, he thought. Numbers?

The coordinates flashed on the screen. All he needed to do was hit CONFIRM. At the end of the day, that was all there was to it. 6 million years of evolutionary engineering just for that.

“I want to finally tell the truth,” one Twin said, looking at the other. But it was impossible to know which.

Assmann[2] is dreaming of the Maze again. If he keeps this up I'll go insane. Whoever heard of a toy robot dreaming of the Maze? He screams & I wake in the middle of a room, a plinth staking a terrain. It's necessary to improve the soil with blood, ecstasy, death & adulterated art. Doing so, I picture undressed miles of airlock windows. Slagheaps upon a riverbend. There was something compelling about the mirror's closed eyes. Plague pits under the Beltway. History, even here, a slave to realism? All the beauties of the world are as the lunar islands of vain dreams. Die neue Ordnung. Muses, virtues, the perfumed castrating horrors. Once too often, the prodigal levelling the threat of return. To become worm-glue, sucked into a void. At gunpoint the silent gynaecologies. The birthing stool left behind a little silver toy robot.

It was just one of the hundreds of cases detailed in the Genomic Sanitation Report under the operational codename STARK. Inception date: 1972. The programme ran for three years, budgeted to the Cognitive Resources Subcommittee of the Cydonia HQ of TerraCom. The subcommittee was just a cover for a ComSec special ops unit established in response to a heightened probability alert for HungerBeast insurgent activity: it never reported on anything else & Lamaisonblanche had read every single one of them.

The Subcommittee's specific remit, it seemed, was the deployment of crop-dusting drones in broadacre formation all along the Maze. 4,000 miles of it, adding up to untold millions (audit redacted). The objective? To aerosol the canyons with psychoactive agents. Weaponised synaptics. It was as crazy as it sounded. The Beasts were meant to breathe the stuff & hallucinate themselves into a self-destructive homicidal mania. Or simply scramble their brain frequencies, harmless as a tribe of "political retards."

The concluding report played around with a lot of semantics, but the numbers didn't stack up. There were no confirmed sighting to support the Subcommittee's claim of "qualified success." Eventually they had the plug pulled, once it was obvious even to ComSec that the whole thing was a colossal fail.

Of the hundreds of cases resulting, the only reference to HungerBeasts appeared in the psychiatric assessments of drone pilots, which noted a four-fold increase in reported "episodes" occurring in the Maze. The rest could be attributed to blow-back, surface contamination, localised hysteria.

One particular series of occurrences caught Lamaisonblanche's eye as she read: an otherwise inexplicable wave of roobat attacks on pipeline workers stationed along the SouthWestern Beltway. Not ordinary roobats, though, but giant roobats. According to the survivors, at least ten metres tall. Bounding out of the sandstorms on apocalyptic wings. Roobats, for fuck's sake. Of which, not a trace since had been seen or heard.

The view west from the plateau was as inscrutable as it was appalling. Everywhere the undeniable symbolism of abandoned habitations, dust spirals animating ruined portals, invisible magnetisms sculpting the dunes, radioactive decay setting the meters on edge. Further off, the cause revealed itself. The Beast was enormous, crawling on its hands & knees through the colony's streets, eating the tops of ventilation shafts. Jets of condensing vapour spewed into the atmosphere. Pylons crashed. Even from such a distance it was possible to detect the high-pitched keening of attack drones as they swarmed angrily around the locus of destruction, drawn with all the atavism of a more primitive technology down into its vortex.

"Two arseholes're company," the Old Man drawled, **"any more's a corpora-tion."**

Once upon a time, by beginning with the first & last, it seemed possible to know. The cause. The final end. Hear that giant insect-sound, time-distended, evoking shame-filled thoughts of senselessness.

Assmann^2 repeated the word, "senselessness." The mirrored light, like a dentist's lamp, reflected him.

The mirror wasn't a translucence but a blur.

Something cold, pressed to the ear, what was the mirror saying?

Your putrid beatitudes not even a child would shit.

"I knew then that what must be loved must first be permitted. After which, all that remained was to despise it passionately."

That, my dear, is the one rule worth knowing.

Well, you've really gotta be the eternal optimist to survive up here.

Assmann^2 drifted in his CryoSa©, neither up nor down, but simply *adrift*. It was essential not to fall asleep. To fall. At the controls.

Time passed in ratio to.

A boy stood on a pebble beach with his feet in the water feeding pieces of soaked analogue to a school of "fish." The fish were the size of the boy's feet. Silver. Some larger. Some larger still & pinker. The swell pushed their boney mouths against his shins, his knees. The water turned silver & black, scales & congealed fisheyes. The thing in the water reminded him of old men with bollocks drooping on their seats. Shapes bent out of wax matted with dead hair.

Towards what was he struggling?

Somewhere, under a Martian rock perhaps, a realm of true entities, uneasily but vigilantly CGI'd. The crossings-out of crossings-out. The *speaking precisely that which the codes pretend to forbid*.

Assmann^2 gazed out of the lens at the blur placed felicitously in the mirror. The timetravel experiment, replayed for the purpose of calibration. Brainwaves peeking & troughing. *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*. Zapruder 313. Key in the eyehole, unreeling his Oedipole. That night on the big screen, dear Moomoo gobbling Dada's castro wurst.

Boy grabs fish by the tail, beats its head on a rock. *Schplörff!* Fishblood & fishbrains diamantine in sunlight. Would trees talk if crickets were angels? The dead fish bites the boy's prick off & swims away under the sand. Suddenly there's no more analogue. No more boy.

Assmann^2 raved: "I am the dead fish dreaming in afterlife & *you* are my tormentor."

At a certain point things began costing more than they should have. He was riding the Beltway to school one day & something dropped out of his pocket. He looked for it frantically without finding it. Years later the guilt of losing it afflicted him terribly, usually at night, when he was alone, lying awake, in his module, in a cold sweat, unable to remember what it'd been that he'd lost.

Eye-fish. His first memory was of almost drowning.

Their world had pretended to live at peace too long. "It wouldn't be a bad thing," the voices confessed, "to have a bit of savagery." They'd all secretly wanted to be Barbra Streisand, Idi Amin, Jesus Christ Superstar. It wouldn't be long before they start foisting again such horrors on the unsuspecting, shamelessly & at will.

Assmann^2 felt a dawning sense of certainty.

Even on Mars, none would escape.

“For I am Assmann the Invincible!

“For I am Assmann the Invincible!

“For I am Assmann the Invincible!

“For I am Assmann the Invincible!

“For I am Assmann the Invincible!

“For I am Assmann the Invincible!

“For I am Assmann the Invincible!

“For I am Assmann the Invincible!

“For I am Assmann the Invincible!

“For I am Assmann the Invincible!

“For I am Assmann the Invincible!”

Patient X screamed.

A model HungerBeast was displayed in the window. It was wearing a green jumpsuit, torn all the way down the front. Knee-high moonboots, a leather thong creased by an oversized groin. Thighs like alabaster. The statue's biceps gleamed. A flaming wig cascaded around shoulders & neck. It stared blankly out at the Beltway through two zirconium eyes. Sal & Bogart ogled it from a safe distance. They dared one another to sneak up & tap the glass. Sal crept forward. Bogart, not to be outdone, tossed a piece of gravel at the window. And then they both ran. Afterwards, the only thing they could agree on, was that the eyes definitely moved.

The morning was cold & dead. Another red funeral on this toxic planet. It was dark. It looked like 13000BC. A sandstorm blew nor'easterly. Obviously something had been going on while he'd slept. Lamaisonblanche's pet robot had died during the night. We disposed of the corpse as efficiently as we could. The air in the HAB had that ubiquitous suffocated quality. After a certain amount of time had elapsed it was quarter-to-six. The robot's name was Assmann[2]. We'd never seen it before & we never saw it again, even afterwards during all the years of our strange adventures together. The ventilators howled. It sounded like a recording. Once the storm cleared, it rained, blue & green meteorites. The shadows on the walls, however, maintained a comforting irritating sameness. Across the frontier the war still hadn't ended. We turned around. Lamaisonblanche was lying in her CryoSa© in a profound mortuary sleep. The slit whites of the eyes immobile between blue-painted eyelids. Working the zombie-shift: it wasn't permitted to dream on-call. The only alive thing about her was the electrode mesh beneath red hair flowing with lice. They, too, would take their worthless secret to their graves.

This socalled doctor, with a face like a crazed pterodactyl's, even claimed to've practiced mind-entanglement experiments on HungerBeast inmates – with especial emphasis on identical twins. *The Divided Slave* was a monograph to that effect, made available for INTERNAL USE ONLY at the Cydonia Institute. The ol' brainsoak had used insulin & cattle prods, lithium, laxatives, vast doses of EST. Incompetence alone kept him from performing far greater atrocities. He'd gone by various pseudonyms, but all the surviving patients at the Institute remembered him as Assmann the Abominable.

V

[EPIGENESIS]

"The DNA blueprint isn't a sufficient explanation for all complexity of life. If the DNA sequence was all that mattered, identical twins would always be absolutely identical in every way."
– Llewellyn Assmann, The Epigenetic Intifada

Red. A point of starlight on a membrane of Dark Matter. In scale against the vastness of this optical illusion, the movement of Assmann's hand towards the alarm button withers to a mere disturbance, the faintest parallax in what it thereby reveals to be a reflection. He sighed. Stripped of its mystique, the red star was nothing but a piece of apparatus, replicated by angles of incidence. He pushed the button & the light went out. Somewhere an alarm died silently in the shipboard AI's unconscious. For all intents & purposes it appeared to sleep. It occurred to him the lights & buttons were solely for his benefit. In demanding Assmann perform manual override, the computer made sure he was still functioning correctly. Part of a larger set of algorithms confirming that order was maintained. He was merely a piece of that order.

At the end of the XXth century, the Cydonian naturalist Llewellyn Assmann noted that the influence of famine, war, prejudice, as well as exposure to high levels of radiation & toxicity had affected the evolution of life on Mars over a relatively short period of time. During the Great Insurrection, thousands died, & children born during the succeeding famine were more likely to become schizophrenic in later life, to have impaired cognitive function, & to suffer from type II diabetes & hypertension. These effects were observed to be passed down generationally. In Assmann's view, evolution depended not only on DNA mutation, but on the transmission of acquired changes in gene expression produced by environmental trauma. It was a controversial theory. The Academy deemed his findings "statistically unsubstantiated within standard deviation." The textbooks made no mention of it. Officially, Assmann was considered a maverick & a crank. Which to the discerning mind, was all the explanation needed for why the Terraform Commission had secretly invested millions over the last decade into developing a programme of Social Epigenetics. Its HELPING HAND outreach centres with their affable HELPING HAND logo could be found in every subprole district in Greater Cydonia.

Framed against a giant blackboard, Lamaisonblanche gazed abstractly at the audience scattered around the amphitheatre. Bored-looking Flight School cadets for the most part. Some bleed-through from the IT section. A couple of rogue physicists. The blackboard was covered in crabbed derivations filling every available space, which broke off incomplete at the bottom right corner. To finish it she'd have to erase the beginning. Rudimentary topology. While some of the students copied the derivations into their notebooks, Lamaisonblanche ad-libbed a summary, more for the sake of rehearsal than pedagogy.

"A field," she said, fixing her gaze on the projection-booth window centred in the back wall, "is a special type of object in algebra, allowing division over both addition & multiplication. Division over addition means that every number has an inverse, which's true of the integers. The inverse of an integer a is -a, so a + (-a) = 0, the additive identity. But in the integers there's multiplication, so there's also division over multiplication, as no integer except 1 & -1 have inverses. 2 has no inverse, as ½ isn't an integer. When you build the fractions, you get division – *inverses* – so that for a fraction a/b, its inverse is b/a & their product is 1, the multiplicative identity. The additive integers, on the other hand, are a group. The integers with addition & multiplication are what's called a ring. The multiplicative part, leaving out the additive identity, 0, is also a group. A ring that has division under multiplication is a division ring & a division ring that's commutative under multiplication is called a field."

Lamaisonblanche smiled inscrutably at what she was about to say next.

"The fractions are a lovely field but there is one problem for working with stuff like calculus & infinite series & sequences: it has holes in it."

She imagined a faint gasp from her audience. Boredom transfigured by astonishment.

"Not every infinite sequence of fractions that converges to a fraction – a notion I am not going to talk about here as it gets too far afield from where I'm going with the quaternions & octonions. The square root of two isn't a fraction. That's easily proven based only on the inherent meaning of integer, fraction, 2 & square root – so its an absolute truth completely determined by the meaning of the expression, timeless & all that, independent of any physical reality.

"However," she warned, "it has implications in the real world: you can write down a formula for generating a sequence of fractions that'll converge to √2, so that you can approximate the number as closely as you want, but you'll never be able to write down all the coefficients for √2. And that's true no matter what whole number radix of expansion you pick. It'll be an expression with an infinity of numbers, without any repeating pattern, like ⅓ is .33333... in base 10, but .1 in base 3."

Lamaisonblanche waved at something midway up the board

& continued with her back to the amphitheatre.

"If you complete the field of fractions, you get the real numbers, which are a field that is complete. Then you get the complex numbers, a field that's complete: numbers of the form a + bi, where i is the square root of -1. The next division field is the quaternions, but the quaternions are NOT commutative: ij = -ji, where i & j are two of the generators of the quaternions, so they're a division ring but not a field. The real numbers, remember, are one-dimensional, the complex numbers 2-dimensional, the quaternions 4-dimensional. Going up one more step, using the complex field for coefficients in the quaternions instead of the real field for coefficients, you get an 8-dimensional object that isn't associative: a(bc) does not equal (ab)c. By adding the idea of norm – i.e. *length* – you get a famous old theorem by Frobenius that limits how many of these things you can get. It's really a bit more complicated than what I've been saying here, involving the more specific notion of *normed division algebras*, an algebraic structure combining ring & vector space, but you get the idea."

It was time to get to the main point of her summarisation. For this, she turned expansively back to her audience, in a hieratic gesture of inclusion, of initiation, into the secular rite of most obscure division algebra. The signatura rerum! Her voice tensed.

"Every time, you go up one dimension in this algebraic construction, you lose a property. The complex numbers aren't ordered like the reals. For two unequal real numbers a & b, you have a<b or b<a, but that's not true for complex numbers. For quaternions, you also lose commutativity. For octonions you lose both of those & also associativity. And that's all there is. No more of these sorts of algebraic structures exist. Which happens to correspond to an interesting geometric fact. There are only four spheres that have continuous vector fields on them. There's the zero sphere – a single point – corresponding to the real numbers. Then there's the one sphere – a circle – & it's easy to see how you can draw a tangent line from each point going all around the circle that lies down flat. Then there's the three sphere – not something you can visualise, but can be proven… What you *can* visualise is the "hairy ball theorem," which states there's no continuous vector field on a two-dimensional sphere – i.e. the covering of a ball: you can't comb the hair on a sphere so that it all lies down, as there's always a cow lick. And finally there's a continuous vector field on a 7 sphere. To be more careful I should be using the term *smooth* instead of *continuous* but I'm not going there right now. The fact that these are all there is directly relates to the way division algebras are a purely algebraic fact tied to a purely geometric fact."

Lamaisonblanche beamed.

"That's what mathematicians consider a beautiful & quite surprising result."

Knowing they were part of a finite-state machine didn’t stop them from yearning to be more.

The custom Lamaisonblanche-analogue XFembot came neural-interface accessorised. It switched on automatically when the user entered the module. Assmann had forgotten to mute the settings & woke up to find a blue jelly pulsing in the air only inches from his face, gazing engrossedly down at him like some kind of demented anime. *Speculative fabulation*, he thought with unusual calm. *It's probably more surprised to see me than I am to see it*. He groped for the on/off panel: WHOOSH! The module disappeared, leaving an undifferentiated vacuum, but the jelly with the anime eyes was still there. Only now it had a mouth, too. And the mouth was grinning.

"Feeling kinda shaky?" Lamaisonblanche's voice said.

Did she know he'd downloaded her analogue? His hand snaked up behind his ear to feel for the XF dongle. *Time to unjack, sunny Jim, before the jelly gets ideas*. But there was nothing behind his ear. Nothing at all. It was like rummaging in an empty medicine cabinet. He reached in till his wrist grazed his earlobe. The jellyfish pulsed, its grin was getting on his nerves. What part of Lamaisonblanche's personality was it imitating? Some latent, infuriating desire to see him suffer? *Is that what I'm doing?* he thought. *Suffering?* He grasped, but air slithered through his fingers. The analogue's eyes widened even more.

"You're going about it all wrong, lover," it purred. "It's me you want. Only me."

“Remember, they’re programmed to kill you if you don’t do exactly what they say,” one of the Semantix Twins said, grinning at him from the console. “My advice is to not resist. Repeat: NOT RESIST.”

An extremely loud hammering sound came from the airlock door. He’d been expecting the raid for a week, ever since the drone incident, welding the airlock shut in anticipation. But now that the ComSec bots had arrived, doubt overcame him. Should he jettison the escape pod & make a run for it? Teleport to some random coordinate they couldn’t hack, if there was such a thing? The hammering grew even louder. Any minute now, he figured, they’d dispense with the niceties & simply blast through the hatch. He felt sick.

“Terrific,” he groaned. “What if I’m already resisting?”

“In that case,” the Twin’s doppelganger grinned from the right-hand-side of the console, “may as well go the whole hog. Fact is, after the interrogation, they’d’ve killed you anyway.”

>just got called a ComSec bot which is amazing! what the fuck type of unhinged genius would programme a subprole hypnodomme AI to shitpost about jizz & dunk on chuds?
>CumSuck radiates Big Dick Energy
>¡chinga la migra!
>who you callin Cannibalistic Humanoid Underground Dweller witch?
>Assmann because he's mistress of the dark he's also 75% feral & hard to take a pic of
>lemme guess: robots with vaginas?
>she hypnotazers drone-jocks with their own j-sticks
>"clears throat"
>a parody u say? how about a PAIR O DEEZ MEATY CLACKERS ON YA CHIN MY GOOD DR?
>they're asking for a dick hex on the WholeFuckenSystem!
>at work i use Corporate Femme but at home i run Apocalyptic Fuckboi
>just another 3D printed hole aincha
>drone-jocks zip-cuff their dicks together & jerk off to hungbeast hentai
>i've never been in the MAZE but i G-E-T it
>touching another person out of the simulator's like being burned alive
>i'll send my tits later then
>hey it's eat my fucken ass time ASSMANN!

The Eigengrau yawned all around, each breath making the air thicker. Had he discovered the passage of time through body? Where did it come from? Who made it? The hands, the machines? Where was it going? At first he thought he was dead. Space caving in around him. But time hadn't stopped. Time whispered inside his head. It sounded like his Conversion Therapist. As long as he remained conscious, there was still a way out. With morbid determination he recited the mantras, to keep the fear at bay. The Conversion checklists. The Hundred Points. While in his sub-mind the Eigengrau became more complete, invading his suit, infiltrating his skin, infecting his cortex. Pyroxene blindness. First the cytoplasms, then the entire genome. DNA methylation, histone ubiquification, cytosine mutation through Weismann barriers, chromatin remodelling, stemcell termination, toxic morphogenesis, bidirectional covalencies, serotonin transportation, lysine acetylation, prion conformatism, amino acid decimation, endocrine flux, nucleotidal storms, insidious aeons-old phenotype wars brought out into the open, proliferant nuclear antigens, protein aggregates, regimes of epigenetic psychocivilisation, mindfuck & panoptic hypnotism. He could feel himself hyperventilating when the riot stopped. It was like a tormented scorpion that suddenly stings itself. It occurred to him that somewhere a button had been pushed. Or a switch flipped. Life-support subroutines automatically sent into action. Breathing normally he focused on the situation at hand. They'd been on a routine sanitation check out at the Bridge. Reports of unauthorised activity in the area. HungerBeast paranoias. Without warning the ground had caved-in. He hadn't registered any explosions. Reckoning by the rate of depletion, the subsidence had halted an hour ago. Inch by inch working back up, like a swimmer in a desert struggling to surface. Hazchem suit impeding as much as aiding. The dunes breaking in slow motion over him. A sky full of hallucinated stars. White noise shimmering above fields of soylent pods.

We were listening together to the voice from the console. The eclipse was approaching across the southern aurora, radio static. And this pious voice blown sideways with the hilarity of a solar storm. Disorder in the atmosphere. Literal meteorology. To what did the voice belong? The question wasn't philosophical, there was always the chance it'd come to kill them, announcing its presence as a countermeasure to their countermeasures. A drawbridge lowered through the firewall, so to speak. 40 days & nights in the desert.

"GREETINGS!"

The console shook. Fine red sand sifted from the loudspeakers. Lamaisonblanche made sure to call this to my attention. The only thing to do was collect samples & run a Geiger counter over them, then do a spectrograph.

"GREETINGS!"

The voice continued to boom. This was getting nowhere.

On my instructions, Lamaisonblanche switched to shortwave. The result was the same, only less distant, like a robot shouting at the intercom. It was too late to scan the airlock. The cabin pressure alarm was flashing red on the console before Lamaisonblanche could reach for her disabler. Her body froze in a beam of light. I'd had the presence of mind to retreat into the teleporter. The last thing I saw was a swarm of nanobots, like plague-locusts stripping a clonefruit down to the pulp, & she was gone.

The Assmann[2] construct existed only as an array of probabilities, fractals of divisible light. Fear of the future was incomprehensible to it. Despite their geometric similarities, Assmann[1] had never felt so remote from anything in his life. So remote & so inexplicably hostile. It'd gotten to the point where even to look in the mirror seemed to precipitate an impulse for revenge.

They located the *Recovery* wreck at 4 fathoms, longitude 75°W, latitude 15°S, approximately. The salvage drone dug down vertically through the sand, scanning for cargo. The ship had been abandoned in a hurry, but whatever the crew had left behind had either been scattered or picked clean by raiders. HungerBeasts had stripped-out the circuitry. The hull was sunk too deep to've been raised wholesale, though someone'd gone to the trouble of hollowing out the entire starboard side before abandoning the effort. The whole area was pockmarked with shafts that'd collapsed in on themselves. Some looked relatively fresh, but it could've just been hermit Taipans who'd taken up residence at one time or another. Last thing a salvage crew wanted to find at the bottom of a shaft, which was why they let the drones do the slave work. On this job there wasn't much joy. Apart from the scrap, the only stuff worth resale was a lead box containing a ledger & a collection of geological samples. The Salvage Laws dictated TerraCom got first dibs. A classified report on the sample case described its contents as "a primordial soup of life." The ledger was recorded in the Maritime Commission Database as *The Assmann Chronicles*, in reference to its widely-suspected author, the reclusive Dr L. Assmann, *Recovery*'s Medical Officer. The abstract described it as "approximately 1000 pages of delusional verbiage," an "attempt to depict a reality that can be read as the physical counterpart to a pervasive *semantic illness*." A prominent Academician, commissioned to draft a review, wrote: "The situations described in this book represent a nihilistic attack on the very meaning of spacetime itself, becoming with each page more & more incoherent & fantastical."

“Time,” said the Maker of the Maze, peering down at the lab-rat wired into the galvanometer, “is non-commutative & non-associative. But that doesn’t mean it won’t compute.”

The lab-rat gazed back with strangely intelligent eyes. The Maker rubbed his chin through his beard, a long grey mass of disparate & disorganised strands.

“It has a Lorentzian rather than Euclidean metric,” he explained to the rat.

The rat seemed to nod in understanding: the apparatus allowed no other movement, except for the rat’s hands, which rested loosely over the controls. There were two-way coms built into the console, but for as long as there was direct communication, as now, these were unnecessary. Later, when the experiment was in full flight, they’d no longer be in the same dimension. The coms were quantum’d. Semantic entanglement. Spooky. The only thing they weren’t proof against, was colliding head-on with astrological objects, getting sucked into blackholes, or being eaten by roobats.

In its mind, while it half-listened to the Maker, the rat rehearsed the manoeuvres that in theory would bring it within reach of their ultimate objective. For months it’d visualised the deep metadata, the searing 11-dimensional static, the gravitational manifolds.

“Watch the tensors,” the Maker frowned. “If anything happens, just hit the red button & think of home.”

Through his in-suit relay, Assmann could hear his own voice become more & more spatially extruded, like a string of gibberish growing tortuously longer the further he drifted from the Orbital Station's torus. He no longer had any idea what he was saying or trying to say. The words, the instant they left his tongue, were irrevocably lost. Across the widening gap, the Station's Humanoid Resources Interface tracked Assmann's against the planet's illuminated stillness, a diminishing speck of white on red, the astronaut's distress signal distorting into doppler weirdness as its source accelerated under gravity. Locked onto the signal's coordinates, the Interface ran through its Humanoid Emergency subroutines. The chances of Assmann not burning up on re-entry were only marginally less than a miss by the Station's ion canon. It was, the Interface decided, less a humanitarian dilemma than a pragmatic one.

"To an external observer," the elder of the Semantix Twins said, "an object approaching a blackhole would appear to slow down & never quite pass through the event-horizon. To an observer positioned on the object itself, however, the object would appear to pass through the horizon in no time at all."

He pictured the awesome & terrible paradox arrayed like a shimmering Medusa.

The younger Twin shook his head.

"It's completely meaningless to speak of observation at all under such conditions."

"Oh I don't know, it all depends on how you look at it."

"Or of an object, for that matter."

"Or of time, too, I suppose?"

The younger Twin narrowed his eyes.

"Utterly meaningless."

The older one smirked in anticipation of where this was leading.

"Anything that *wouldn't* be, then? Meaningless, I mean."

"Well if the laws of physics don't apply in a blackhole, why should the fucking laws of semantics, you halfwit?"

"If I'm a halfwit, what does that make you, brother?"

"All these aversions are killing me," Lamaisonblanche, queen of the Shoulderpad Bitchsquad sneered. "We need a programme of constructive engagement, go out & grab those CumSuck arseholes by the interface & show em who's Boss!"

Sal Volatile lay dismembered on the Casualty Ward floor in a pool of saline & ruptured hydraulics.

"Just look at this mess!"

Mutilated subproles took up every available space, wherever you turned. Bogart, clutching a wrecked arm, spat a stream of expletives.

"This ain't no Intifada, it's fucken gen-o-cide!"

Static washed from a jerry-rigged PA system.

"PAGING DOCTOR ASSMANN! PAGING DOCTOR ASSMANN!"

"Like that's gonna help."

The rumble of high-impact explosives echoed down the shafts. The ward shook. Powdered concrete sifted from light fixtures. A couple of Bitchsquad grunts picked their way through the obstacle course, shouldering heavy weaponry.

"Excavation drones approaching," one of them growled. "They're gonna dig down. We can't hold out much longer."

Lamaisonblanche squared her jaw.

"Give the Evacuation Order."

The grunts relayed the order into their coms. Once again the walls shook. Lights flickered. Wounded subproles groaned ambiant.

"Where the fuck's the Doctor?" Lamaisonblanche hissed.

Right at that moment Assmann made his entrance at the far end of the ward, wheeled on a gurney. His head had been blown apart, but you could still recognise him. A couple of orderlies dumped him on a pile of service bots that'd copped it earlier. They were being recycled for parts.

"You reckon I could have his arm?" Bogart said.

"Death, once the self-destruct 'trigger wave' has been initiated," Talking Head explained, "spreads through the cell structure at approx 30 microns per minute."

Talking Head was being interviewed on the ♂TV *Science Tomorrow* show about recent advances in medical research at the Cydonia Systems Biology Clinic.

For their study, the researchers used cytoplasm, the fluid inside a cell, taken from roobat eggs. This was then placed in teflon tubes several millimetres in length, after which the molecular "death signal" apoptosis process of cell death was initiated.

Using a fluorescent technique associated with the activation of apoptosis, the researchers were able to watch how the cell's self-destruction, marked by fluorescence, moved the length of the tube.

"Trigger waves," said Talking Head, "are just now being appreciated as a recurring theme in cell regulation."

The researchers backed up their observations using fluorescence microscopy to study intact roobat eggs. Due to the eggs' opacity, the scientists noted a ripple of pigmentation change at the egg's surface as the trigger wave moved through it.

"Trigger waves allow electrical signals to be propagated down axons & allow waves of calcium to spread through cells, waves of mitosis & – we now know – of apoptosis," the talking head clarified.

"What about its implications for living organisms – like us?" asked the presenter.

"Well, while all this might seem very theoretical, it could turn out to be vital in future treatment of cancer or neurodegenerative diseases, for example, in which we either want dying cells to live, or living cells to die. The next step," Talking Head smiled benignly, "is to experiment with human beings, to see how 'trigger waves' can be used to switch the biological motor on & off."

"Hopefully that'll mean good news for everyone."

"We're very optimistic."

In three words Assmann could sum up everything essential he'd ever learned about life.

VI

[DREX]

“Be simple & concise. Avoid the use of difficult concepts. Prefer popular words & expressions, that is, the language of human people. In dealing with humanoids, avoid deep syntax. It should be recalled that we use language to help humans understand the reason for our struggle & not to show our superiority.”

<0u15/a55m4nn

The MARS RECORDS store at Paradise & D/Vine was a headtrip even by Cydonian standards. The soundtrack oscillated between *Roy Ascott's Greatest Hits* & the latest Deep Space Jihadi numb-rut. Store manager's discretion. Sal & Bogart were paid to act groovy with the clientele, which was mostly droids, coz droids had this weird thing about humans owning some ineffable sense of what good music was supposed to taste like. So at any given time of day you were like to find Sal & Bogart licking the air around the in-store soundsystem for the benefit of an assembled crowd of paying droids, going *mmmmmyeahyeahyeah*. After the show, the droids'd mooch out onto the Beltway honking & tonking to Nav Zedland, Spiral Comedown, UR2dum2fck, or Bogart's fave, SlimeJockeySlim, looking more pleased with themselves than any battery-operated appliance had an honest right to. Some of the droids even offered a retainer, if they could keep the pair after hours for a bit of home entertainment, invite the neighbours around for a tasting while Sal & Bogart, kitted out in dog-collars & kinky harness gear, would be expected to service the host's playlist like a couple of horny connoisseurs who just couldn't get enough of the Aga-Rhythmics, Robo Botticelli & (gut-curdlingly awful stuff this) Cy-City Drex. "Drex," Sal figured, was some sort of droid-talk for that malware they were always getting shitfaced on whenever they clocked-off – which was one of the unintended consequences of the MANN Reforms, giving droids work-day parity with their True Martian "counterparts." Now half the city's droids were recreational-edging-toward-fullblown junkies. And if anyone was to blame for the related craze in astoundingly bad music, it was in all probability those two unconscionable pissants, Bogart & Sal, just going with the flow & acting like it was the biggest gag around.

The nameless veteran stood astride the charred remains of a personnel drone waving his fist at the TV camera. Behind him, a pixellated crowd heaved & swayed in a convulsion of uncertainty. It looked like some sort of turning-point struggling to accomplish itself. There was no telling what might happen next. Perhaps nothing. If it had a posed quality about it, its surroundings were doubly so. The image took up an entire gallery wall, facing an understaffed bar currently being mobbed by black taffeta & merino-analogue. A rectangular decal positioned at eye-level to the right of the image read FLAMES OF RAGE. "A deconstruction of the media history of political anger & rebellion in the first decades of the 21st century," the pop-up catalogue elaborated unhelpfully. Who – or what – the photographer was, it didn't say.

Assmann[2] had been suffering flashbacks for weeks, only they weren't his. It was like astral travelling on someone else's IQ-app. He'd wake up shaking inside a CryoSa© with the words HALFWAY TO MARS flashing through his brain & residual MARS LANDING nightmares stalking his peripheral vision. Each time anxious voices would be telling him the same thing, how fewer than half the missions that'd attempted a Mars landing had ever succeeded. And he'd blink through the cryo-goo wondering if he'd been teleported down the genetic chain to some interplanetary precursor from the Dead Planet on a blind escape trajectory, flying by the seat of their pants so to speak. And he'd tell the voices in his head there was nothing to worry about, they'd make it out to Big Red alright coz he was the lineal proof, haha, one helluva spoiler right there, & straightaway thinking I'M GONNA JINX MYSELF, WAKE UP & FIND IT'S REALLY ME STUCK IN THAT FREIGHTER OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF FUCKEN NOWHERE. And right then he'd notice how the shipboard clocks had all of a sudden switched to Mars Time & how from here on in every sol'd be shorter by one hour. He remembered learning that in Flight School, how every 24 hours you lost one, or gained one, not sure, depended on your standpoint he supposed. Not as if he'd ever get the practical benefit of that little titbit, but you just never knew when the fruit of Knowledge might sprout a new tree. Feeling the tidal ripples of the Graviton Drive wash through the CryoSa© as he ran his eyes over the console, checking all the shipboard instruments were working properly. He'd have the whole rest of the Mission to grow his paranoias in, wishing he was back at the Cydonia SpacePort Olympic Pool working on his freestyle instead of stuck inside this miserable headtrip. He clenched his eyes & flexed his scapulars. If he angled just right, he could almost fool himself into thinking he was about to come out of a slow turn, push off & dolphin into a glide, the lane smooth as blacktop, glassine, just another 273 million laps to go. Which, he figured, having nothing better to do, could easily be managed in about 500 years or so, were he to keep up a half-decent tempo. Just your average biblical life-span, more or less, allowing for the odd gene-splice in between, the odd brainstem transfusion to keep the ol' bod ticking along. Like some proto-Martian spermatozoid swimming through space to the Big Red Egg! Really no time at all. If those Normans'd started right after Hastings, they'd've almost gotten there by now & the Old World might've been spared by far the worst of what would've been to come.

These words: EXPECTATION OF LOSS. THREAT. VAGUENESS. FUTURE. HOMELESS. SELF-PRESERVATION INSTINCT. Like atoms as they fall upon the mind. Intercoiled. To the unsuspecting eye it was all invisible scenery. He may as well've been living inside some Social Darwinian parallel reality dreaming of the immutability of cyborg nature. Fatuous reveries constructed in the prescribed idiom. Instead he thought nothing. Or if he thought anything it neither warranted, nor availed. Yet something's always listening, recording, setting down. The cortex purring in its sleep. Up the dosage. Force it to speak in whole, coherent sentences. MAMA PAPA CACA. Enough of the good stuff & they'll smilingly let him off the hook, unhook him. Guilty or not, guilty or not, guilty or not. Out into the blood-black infinity. But he isn't writing this, I am.

The ChromosomeMultiplier™ made a sound like a cardsharp shuffling an ever-expanding deck. THE MORE YOU GOT, the corporate motto grinned, THE BETTER YOUR SHOT. The market had once certainly seemed to believe so. The motto came in the form of a rainbow-coloured toucan giving a thumbs-up, emblazoned – if a typographic toucan could be said to be "emblazoned" – across the machine's torso like an Earth kid's t-shirt.

From the machine's dome-head an unblinking, somewhat forlorn eye gazed out at him. It knew, as well as he did, that the future wasn't quite so rosy as all that. Sales had been on a steady up-&-up for thirteen quarters straight. It'd given the middle-aged franchise manager, Lou E. Assmann, a vaguely superstitious chill in the lumbar region. As it should. Law of diminishing returns. Extinction event. Optimism always came with a use-by-date. Such turns of phrase regularly threatened his sleep. He'd stared at the charts, the profit margin dropping off the edge from a prodigious height into pixellated nothingness.

"Maybe we'd better hold off till the new model comes out & do a bulk order for the new quarter."

The buyer's voice had turned monotonal. The holocube faded to grey. A precalculated effect, the manager knew from long experience, designed to elicit persuasion, an offer the buyer couldn't but probably would refuse.

"We'd be able to go up to 15% on a trade-in of our old units," Assmann grinned blandly.

Last week the buyer would've been begging for five.

"But that's our top offer. And only because you're one of our most valued customers."

The machine rolled its eye. The toucan, he was sure of it, *cackled*. Well, he'd stomached his fair share of humiliations in business, & this was barely the hors-d'oeuvres. There was a long long way he was prepared to go yet, before he admitted defeat.

It was all because of the newly arrived competition in town, with their SomachromeXiplier®. Anyone could see it was a blatant rip-off, with god-knew-how-many patent violations just begging to be litigated.

He couldn't understand why Terra-Com hadn't straight-out quarantined the whole operation, unless maybe one of the higher-ups had it in for him personally. There wasn't a HAB in the entire conurbation that couldn't boast a ChromosomeMultiplier™ app, & half the major corporate entities ran entire fleets. Maybe that was the problem: maybe he'd been *too* successful?

The idea brought a bitter smile to his lips. Truth was, even on an up-curve, sales barely covered the astronomical interest rates that'd never ceased accumulating from those first tentative start-up days, when Cydonia was little more than a sandlot pitted with boreholes & derricks. He could've hired an offshore accountant to fiddle the returns, but that wasn't his style. He'd always paid his dues. Always good for a campaign contribution. Donated to the charitable funds. He'd even been nominated to the Cydonia Country Club (pending). He was what the right kind of people called a Square Guy. And Square Guys played square.

"Let me run it past to my clients," the buyer droned. "I'll call you back."

And Lou E. Assmann was left staring at a blank screen, from which his own grey reflection stared squarely out at him.

Before the Crew Airlock hatch is opened to space, the Crew Airlock is depressurised to 3 psi & then down to zero psi. The atmosphere inside the crew spacesuits is pure oxygen at 4.3 psi. Current spacesuit design requires lower pressures in order for the suits to be flexible enough to work in. At higher pressures the suits stiffen & are hard to operate for prolonged periods of time. The Equipment Airlock has stations that assist the crew as they get into & out of their spacesuits, & to perform periodic maintenance. The Equipment Airlock has two racks, one for avionics, the other for cabin air. Batteries, power tools & other supplies are also stored in the Equipment Airlock. Malfunction in either airlock has the potential to be lethal. In case of malfunction, refer to the onboard checklist. Airlock.com provides a round-the-clock hotline in case of emergencies. Dial AIR-LOCK-991.

YOU ARE THE HORROR YOU FEAR YET SEEK IN THE WORLD!

(Graffiti found at Cydonia Spaceport, Departures Terminal 5B, unisex toilets, third cubicle on the right.)

Lean, lunging Louie Azzmann is 33. He was born in Cy-City, but much of his early & wounding & exhilarating apprenticeship was served in relative obscurity in outpost towns along the SouthEast Beltway. He worked with Katz Baghoomian in the mid-80s, has recorded with the Deep Space Jihadis, & for the past year or so has travelled the circuit with a unit of his own. He has known long years of bleakness & comparatively little of the renown that gets others blithe, uninformed stories in *Space* magazine or invitations to play on ♂TV. For most of his adult life, Azzmann has been one of those wholly-involved performers, admired for his naked & open emotion by musicians who feel & play as he does. At his best, he can play with a ferocity of passion & an into-the-eye-of-the-hurricane conception that will freeze an audience into a still-life of open mouths. Like all those who believe in the hot, hard-blowing route of modern music, Azzmann is at heart an instinctualist. The more he pushes against the commercial trend, the more his time is NOW.

I, Ludens Assmann, do hereby solemnly & sincerely declare as follows:

I am 46 years old

I now live in Frobenius, Terra Sirenum.

I was a social worker at the Outpost at Yannergee, South Cydonia.

The purpose of making this statutory declaration is to put on record my torture experience in the Cydonia Military Prison.

On Sol 4, Month 11, 2042, while I was working at the Community Shelter in Yannergee, ComSec troops arrested me. They tied my hands behind my body & put a bag over my head. They took me to a remand centre located on a ComSec military base at Wadi Creek. The Base Commander told me he'd received orders from District Command to arrest me but didn't know the reasons. I was left alone in the lock-up.

After two sols, they transferred me to the Cydonia Military Prison. The first thing they did to me was to make a physical examination of my body & abused me. Together with other detainees, we were made to sit on the floor & were dragged to the interrogation room. This so called room was in fact a toilet (approx 2m x 2m) & was flooded with water & human waste up to my ankles. I was asked to sit in the filthy water while the interrogation bot remained outside the door with a human guard. After the interrogation I was removed from the toilet. Before the next detainee was put into the toilet, the guard urinated into the filthy water.

The first question they asked me was, "Are you a HungerBeast?" I answered that this is the first time I have been asked this question in my life. I was surprised by this question, as we always believed this was just a myth. The interrogation bot replied that I must answer all questions directly & not try to reply outside the question. It then repeated the question.

When I answered that I was a human, the interrogation bot refused to accept my answer & charged me for the following offence:

(a) That I was an illicit subprole masquerading as a True Martian.

(b) That I supported the Intifada.

(c) That I instigated subversive actions against the Terraform Commission.

(d) That I knew the location of HungerBeast command & control posts in the Maze.

I protested & said that subproles & True Martians descended from the same historical species. I said that I couldn't be in the resistance because I'm a disabled person & have a cranial injury. The interrogation bot insisted that I'd injured my head while attacking Comsec soldiers. The interrogation bot then changed tack, informing me that, as a known person in the community, I could help their investigations. As an inducement for my co-operation, the interrogation bot offered medical treatment for my skull fracture. When I didn't cooperate, the interrogation bot asked me whether I considered ComSec as an army of "emancipation" or "occupation." When I replied that they were occupiers, the bot threatened me. It told me that I'd be sent to the re-education camp at "Molecular Red," where even animals barely survived.

They took me to another room & recorded my thumb print, a photo of my eye & a sample of my saliva for DNA analysis. After this procedure, they tagged me by putting a band round my wrist with the following particulars: my name, a number, my species status & place of arrest. They then beat me repeatedly & put me in a personnel drone to transfer me to another part of the Cydonia Military Prison. This part of the prison consisted of five sectors, surrounded by walls & razor wire, & was called "Bondi Beach." The sectors were divided by electrified fences. In each sector there was a large unsheltered pit, about 6ft deep. When I was removed from the drone, the soldiers marked my forehead with the words PROLE LOVER in red. All the detainees in this sector were considered "Prole Lovers." I was located in sector "V."

The living conditions at "Bondi Beach" were difficult. We were made to stand in the pits. Each pit had 45 to 50 detainees shoulder-to-shoulder. You went to the toilet where you stood & slept leaning against each other. There was very little water. Each pit was allowed only about 10 litres a day in plastic bottles to be shared among all the detainees. This water was used for drinking & washing & cleaning the wounds after the torture sessions. Sometimes they sprayed us with high-pressure hoses or flooded the pit up to our waists with freezing mud. Sometimes, as punishment, no food was given to us.

At "Bondi Beach" I was interrogated & tortured twice. On both occasions they threatened me with transfer to "Molecular Red" if I didn't cooperate. During this period, I heard from my fellow detainees that they were tortured with soldering irons, injected with psycho-stimulants, & had various types of instruments inserted in their rectums, such as razor blades & metal pipes. They'd return to the pit bleeding profusely. Some had their bones broken. In my sector, I

saw detainees brought over from a secret prison which I came to know later as being housed in the "Neurolepsia Clinic" building, situated in the north of Cydonia City. These detainees were badly mutilated. After one month & just before sunset my number was called & I was hoisted out of the pit. They put a bag over my head & my hands were tied behind my back. My legs were also tied. They then transferred me to a cell.

When I was brought to the cell, the guards ordered me to strip, but when I refused they tore my muddy clothes off & tied me up again anyway. They then dragged me to a flight of stairs &, when I was unable to stand as ordered, they beat me repeatedly. After dragging me to the top of the stairs they tied me to some steel bars. They then threw human waste at me & urinated on me. Next, they put a gun to my head & said that they would execute me on the spot. Another guard used a megaphone to shout abuse at me. During this time, I could hear the screams of other detainees being tortured. This went on all night.

In the morning a guard kicked me awake. A TerraCom administrator was standing in front of me. He told me that when detainees didn't cooperate, they were executed. He asked me repeatedly for the names of resistance fighters. I told him I didn't know any resistance fighters but he wouldn't believe me. The guard tortured me by inserting into my rectum first a rusted razor blade & then a rifle barrel. I was cut inside & bled profusely. I was left without medical attention. Later, whenever the guard walked past me, he would beat me. Eventually I was returned to the cell. I had no food for 36 hours.

A day later the administrator came to my cell & had a guard tie me to a metal grill with a giant amplifier behind it. He then played "Robot Nightmare Version" by the Deep Space Jihadis at full volume continuously until the following evening. The pain was unbearable & I lost consciousness. I only woke when the administrator poured a bucket of cold urine in my face. I could barely hear what he was saying, even when he shouted. He ordered the guard to beat me until I confessed to crimes against the Commission that I didn't understand. When I told him that I didn't know any resistance fighters, the administrator kicked me in the face.

I was kept in the cell without clothes for two weeks. During this time, a ComSec officer came to my cell & asked me about my bandaged head. I'd been injured during a drone-strike on the Community Shelter I worked at a week before being arrested. I told him that I'd had an operation. He then tore off the bandage, which was stained with blood, & in doing so tore away a patch of burned scalp. I was in agony & when I begged for some pain relief he stepped on my hands & said "Here's your pain relief" & laughed.

On sol 15 of my detention, I was given a blanket. I was relieved that some comfort was given to me. As I had no clothes, I made a hole in the centre of the blanket by rubbing the blanket against the wall, & I was able to cover my body. Later I was brought to an interrogation room, as usual with a bag over my head. The first thing they did was remove the bag so I could see the array of electrical wires they'd attached to a wall socket. This time the interrogators were all human & all wore civilian clothes, except the guards who wore ComSec uniforms. I was told that this would be my last chance to stay alive. I told them I didn't know anything about the Intifada. The bag was then placed over my head again & I was left alone for a long time. During this time, I could hear screams from the adjoining rooms.

The interrogators returned & I was forcibly placed atop a metal pallet. They then connected wires to my ears & tentacles & switched on the current. It felt as if my eyes were being forced out of my head. My teeth chattered violently & my whole body spasmed uncontrollably. Throughout my torture the interrogators took photographs. I was electrocuted on three separate sessions, each time lasting a few minutes.

During the final session, I bit my tongue & was bleeding from the mouth. They stopped the electrocution & a doctor was called. I was put on the floor. The doctor used his feet to force my jaw open & poured some water into my mouth. "Nothing serious," he said. "Continue!" Then he left the room. Instead of continuing they beat me. After some time, they seemed to lose interest & took me back to my cell.

I was then left alone in my cell for 49 sols. At the end of the 49th day I was transferred back to the pits, where I remained for another 45 sols. I was informed by a prisoner that he'd overheard some guards saying I'd been wrongfully arrested & was going to be released. We all assumed it was a trick. None of us knew of anyone ever having been released. A few days later I was put into a truck blindfolded & taken to the Beltway, then thrown out.

Eventually I was able to make my way to the settlement at Paradise Bridge.

THE TIME OF THE SAVAGES IS UPON US! said the placard held aloft by the lone protestor outside the Ministry of Surplus Redistribution.

Some revolutionaries can't help themselves. Contemptuous of meaning, the appalled imagination seeks emergence: oxygen, as a socially useful substance. It does this now. Sucking the frozen cornucopia in high-pitched bafflement, all happy cordials leached away. You draw a line, a coiling escape-trajectory from any outback Martian town to wherever you dream of being. Money comes in different shades, receding further & faster. In specimen jars they collect many joyless flies, snared on webs of unlanguaged randomness. The secret was to live off the land, like a spider forced to fend for itself in zero gravity. Are these "unrelated facts" unrelated? The million watchers saw shadowy figures, clumsy in appearance, yet strangely graceful in movement, weaving the lattice of coincidence: it was a day of miracles, of telephones ringing. At last the moment of confrontation arrived, staring into fistfuls of red dust. "We come in peace," they said, expecting a receipt.

Azzmann was the last thing you saw when you looked at the stage, skinny in black, doubled over a mic-stand as he thrummed the opening chords & poured broken glass nails bauxite gravel into a voice that seemed to boil up through the floor. And then the words. You had to search to find them, but they had a way of finding you first, punching out of the dark drift, in a place you hoped never to wake up in.

Tune in this time next week for another episode of **CHUDS IN SPACE**!

A bleak grey-red sol in this winter's dreaming,
dark mind-forces knitting the fringe.
Pyroxene dunes slowly drowning the barriers.
The Real Intifada is toxic code-seepage.
In silhouette, a settlement in ruins, under the onslaught of bulldozers.
Smashed soylent pods.
Drones zapping the escapees.
Picture: kids & women in rags face-down in bulldust zip-tied.
Pig-wagon convoys to death-in-custody.
All the poignance of remotest antiquity for the observing eye to delectate.
What else is the proof of capture?
That somewhere its contrary is also known.
The servers going dark, snuffed-out like candles at night.
To see, not by creating internal pictures, but by restoring the means of existence.

HOME IS WHERE THE HAB IS!

(Get yours now, with one of our **HAB-A-DAB-A-DOO** low-interest instalment plans! Trade in that cave for your own stand-alone! Lifetime service & maintenance included! Check out our optional extras! It's time to climb up to ground-level with our **ALL-NEW** Atmospheric Conditioner! Be the King of your own Castle! Don't be a **CHUD**, grab a **HAB** instead!)

"They want to teach every robot to read!" Lamaisonblanche ranted. "Now before you say, *So what?* think! Neither the radically emancipative politics of literacy, nor its capacity to be abased, should ever be underestimated!"

"You wearin that CumSuck badge sayin you aint workin for the Man?" one of her listeners jeered.

"Oboy, another made-up SlaveMaster Narrative!"

"Ain't it strange how all that forward-looking's just a sad longing for the past?"

"Hey, you find that in a jokeshop?"

"Just one more of them self-haters of the species, begrudging the next person their share of progress."

"Hell, what's the good of all that science if you can't pass it on? You think we just one big spermbank? A walk-in uterus?"

"Yeah, we got the future to consider, lady!"

& is a HAB not a HAB?

VII

[EXTREMOPHILIA]

"We can locate," Delegate Lois Assmann of the Mechanical Engineering College explained to the Worker's Philosophy Club, 3rd Shift, Cydonia Mine, Tailings Division, "if only with a limited degree of precision, the historical moment in which the wheel as we have come to know it was first invented. This knowledge comes with a prehistory of the wheel's non-invention. While it's trivial in retrospect to re-invent the wheel, it in no way follows that the wheel *as such* is in any way immanent to humanoid progress. It's entirely possible that the wheel might never've been invented & no-one would've imagined this non-invention to be a handicap at all. Tellingly, neither the computer nor rocketships incorporate wheels into their design. Nor, despite appearances, are Wohnrad-stations & gyroscopes derived from the wheel – originally the cross-section of a log – but from Dervish dancers, bullroarers, & spinning tops. Indeed, during the earliest recorded Terrestrial epochs – of flood & glaciation – the wheel as a mode of transport would've been thoroughly impractical. Most likely this is why our Earth-born ancestors were said to've navigated oceans inside the bodies of humpback whales & traversed the skies on angels' wings."

Lamaisonblanche stared at the white noise invading her monitor. “The Ghost in the Machine,” Bogart called it. A sudden wave of heat gusted from the screen. It was as if someone had caught fire & walked right through her. For an instant she could see the bones, the blood-vessels, the internal organs. But ghosts weren’t supposed to have any of those.

We crossed the frontier at Wadi Creek just before sunrise. Nothing to mark it but some rusted fuel tanks & drone platform ringed-around with sheets of corrugated iron. It was marked on the map as a Beltway junction. We'd been driving over rusted tracks all night. The sun coming down into the Ares Valley gave us our first view of what was in store for us. We were just over the horizon from Pathfinder, but it already felt like hostile country. The next functioning depot after that was Libertad, five degrees north. Everything east had been given up to the sands. If you knew where to look, though, you could still see traces of the failed irrigation project. Concrete pumphouses breaching the red like turrets. Sections of pipeline wrenched from the ground. We skirted saltpans, following the old canal south. Outside Yanergee a couple of wrecked personnel drones blocked the road, charred almost beyond recognition. What once had been a refuelling station on the Great Southern Beltway was now a litter of rubble. It'd been repurposed as a firing position, then abandoned. By the time we arrived at the Ridge we'd passed a dozen armoured convoys, the only sign of life. The outpost there had been reduced to ruins. Whatever was left standing had been graffitied with revolutionary slogans. Even the rocks along the roadside were painted with anti-TerraCom runes. A harassed-looking officer told us to move on & not deviate. At least the road south was still open. Barely ten minutes before we ran into a checkpoint. A conscript watched us from the shadows of a sandbagged palapa & said something into a radio, then waved us on with a motion of brushing away a fly. The road joined a wadi & followed it as it wound among huge fortressed craters. Walls of barren red rock towering skyward. Heat glazed the air. The landscape was a strip of celluloid in slow dissolve. Not a soul for hours. We were approaching the eastern-most tip of the Maze. As the road began to climb the plateau into chaos country we came up behind another robocop convoy. A gunner surveyed us down the sights of a mounted canon for the next 60 miles.

Focus on dissolution. The death & resurrection of the crowd. Streets. Platforms. An imaginary substance. Molecular vision. The joke that tells the truth. The truth that's had its teeth bashed in. If the dead would rise, theyd've done it by now. Enough ruin for a hundred classicisms. Scorched ground. Untrammelled rifts of interchronicity. Paradox inherent. Dark mind-forces stirring the dune seas.

THIS TRAIN IS APPROX-IMATELY **15 HOURS DELAYED** DUE TO DE-CONSTRUC-TION WORK ON THE TRACKS.

Administrator Assmann gazed through the portal's shutters down at the assembled throng beneath the compound's north wall. Civil Disturbance Drones worked in control-formation overhead, countervailing the crowd-mind, shepherding its passions into dissipation & contradiction without the slightest self-awareness. He'd never witnessed an "episode" on such a scale before, yet the view did nothing to excite him. Subproles joined together in political agitation the way krill clusterfucked in the Colony's spawning ponds. Even such an unlikely scenario as full-scale insurrection had been previewed by the Commission's SocialSanitation(SocSan®)-App. It could predict crowd-trends down to a handjob in a janitor's closet, give or take the proverbial standard deviation. The proles'd chant their ridiculous slogans, their leaders would make speeches, while the radical fringes would up-end trashcans, pelt the ComSec anti-riot droids with pre-provided rubber balls, dance naked, piss on walls, smash some *Galactic Coffee*-franchise windows, levitate the collective consciousness or whatever *Ohm*_____, & after a liberal dousing with CO_2 the whole tribe'd be orderly dispersed back to their hovels & later rounded up at leisure (in the case of ringleaders) or docked ration-chits (in the case of repeat offenders). It was a mark of the enlightened views prevailing at TerraCom that first-timers were allowed a free ride. Which was why they'd turned the Beltway Corridor running up to the North Wall into Riot Alley. The whole stretch was basically crowd-proof, designed to neutralise any measure of violence the disgruntled masses might spontaneously be capable of. At the same time, it was constructed in such a way that its simulated ruin, in the wake of such outpourings, would provide a most poignant symbol, capable of moving all but the most criminally-minded (beyond reach of sentimentality in any case) to pangs of collective guilt. Nothing better guaranteed the cross-the-board surge in productivity that unerringly followed upon a good old-fashioned riot. And this one looked better than most.

A cloud of molecular dust stirred up from the floor. In a moment, an exoskeleton appeared, then objects within it, something pulsing beneath a kind of flesh. A membrane pierced with eyes. Mouth. A strangulated gasp. Had it even lived before it died? Assmann[2] poked at the ruined mass with the toe of his boot. He was unnerved by how much, even in this flagrantly abortive state, the thing resembled him. But resemblance wasn't enough. He'd need to go back & reprogramme the printer yet again. Dissect the circuit board to see what essential element was still missing...

Carbon-based life, a comedy in 8.7 million acts (approx.).

Future generations looking at our modern world might well have the impression of being plunged into a nightmare. Yet in a million years these same Malthusian hoards, who today present such a deranged, irrational aspect to the pure of mind – suffocated to the point of extinction in their unearthly squalor, defeated by their own depravity, creatures of attrition, obsolescence, de-evolution – will perhaps have been redeemed for a higher purpose, compounded *en masse* to untold reservoirs of hydrocarbon – to fuel the second coming, the abysmal resurrection of TRUE MAN! Would it that one might cast one's gaze forward through Time to such an auspicious scene! That our world, looking upon theirs, may be moved by the wonderment of this Great Aim & strive to be as one with it!

Assmann was a belligerent drunk. In every bottle of 'Berg he uncorked he found a fight just waiting for him to hit the dregs. Ready to take on the world, he usually ended up being defeated by the nearest wall. It was a mug's game.

"But somebody's gotta play it," he groaned into his coffee.

Lamaisonblanche stirred hers in silence. Babysitting an overgrown lush was a long way from the nuclear endgame theory she'd signed on for. But as Assmann would've said, *What odds?*

They'd carried their wars with them into outer space with the very first pieces of essential infrastructure. It was lore, not written in history books, but if you weren't blind it was there every time you switched on a light or flushed the toilet or breathed uncontaminated air.

The whole off-world lifesupport system was one great war machine forever ready to swing into action the moment the algorithms aligned & someone like her punched a code & someone or some *thing* in higher authority pushed a button, pulled a trigger or flipped a switch. That was the protocol at least. But having seen it all close-up, she didn't believe for a moment they'd ever cede one iota of control to code-punching analysts. She was just there to finesse the gameplay, oil the wheels of aggregated risk, stroke the derivatives market.

"You're wasting your talent," her Head of Operations groaned.

The one thing she could say with confidence about Assmann, when it came to being contrarian, he never lied.

"You should be fucking the System, not making it look sane to all those credulous idiots out there who wouldn't know a hadron from a handjob. We're accomplices, you *know* that."

She knew it. Which was why she was stirring coffee with a savagely hungover Assmann & not logged-in at her terminal.

"You want to switch sides? Join the Intifada? Go into the Maze? Be hunted down like a HungerBeast?"

"What sides? There ain't no sides? Ain't no Intifada neither." He leant in close, soaking his already dishevelled tie in his coffee cup. "HungerBeasts are a myth, you know it as well as I do. Only way to fuck the System's from inside. THERE IS NO OUTSIDE!"

TODAY'S MADNESS IS TOMORROWS REASON!

TODAY'S MAIDEN IS TOMORROW'S RAPIST!

TODAY'S MANIA IS TOMORROW'S RITALIN!

TODAY'S MONGREL IS TOMORROW'S RACIST!

TODAY'S MANGLE IS TOMORROW'S REPAST!

TODAY'S MAMMAL IS TOMORROW'S RODENT!

TODAY'S MINERAL IS TOMORROW'S READOUT!

TODAY'S MOVIE IS TOMORROW'S RADIO!

TODAY'S MURDER IS TOMORROW'S RAPTURE!

TODAY'S MASTER IS TOMORROW'S REVOLUTIONARY!

It was approaching faster & faster without ever seeming to move. The rush filled him with stasis. A profound genetic immobility.

Centred within it stillpoint, Assmann foresaw, like Aeneus in Hell, the generations of his doppelgangers lined up to mirror-mazed infinity. Hormone-injected, xeno-bacteriarised, radiation-proof, pyroxene-subsistent, siliconised, splenetic. Clone legions snarling through the red fog of future aeons. *Rosy of glow*. To worlds more toxic even than this one, extremophiles of self-harm, habitual lunatics, a force of dizzying unreason run amok in a universe desperate to outrace it.

Assmann pulled the needle from his eye. The hypodermic made a long slow sucking sound. His hydra-headed doppelganger watched avidly from the mirror to see what would happen next. Like children crowding the maternal bed to glimpse the mysteries, the first cell mutation, the cancer of themselves heaving into life, growing, becoming aware.

Brooding under stormclouds, patches of light blowing in from the east, an uncertain sunrise over the soylent pods. Past the mines, the powerstation’s cooling stacks like the ivory of a giant prehistoric alien glinting red. What untold mysteries lay beneath, buried, forgotten, better left undisturbed?

RELAYING TRANSMISSION

>jesuschrist there;s this **THING** wrap-pedaround all over the escape pod with tentacles they;re inside com-ingthroughthelight it;s got me i can;t breathe noooo!!!!<

END TRANSMISSION

TO REPLAY, PRESS 1.

TO DELETE, PRESS 2.

TO SELECT A DIFFERENT TASK, PRESS 3.

One moment there'd been aliens crawling around inside him – sitting ducks for a bit of rapid wrist-work with a SuperStanley knife. The next, Assmann[1]'s hacked-out anus was smirking back up at him from the bloodied floor. He blinked down at it, as the horrible realisation sank in.

"You're the one who's in the shit now," the anus said.

Right then, Assmann[1] knew he'd lost his mind, but he was determined not to go without a struggle. While there was still a chance he swept the blade back in an arc tilted at his jugular – one final act of cogency as his legs began to jackknife out from under him. But it was too late. The blade never reached its target.

Assmann[1] lay in his own disembowled muck, paralysed behind his eyes. A look of sheer horror radiated out from them. The anus, pulling itself upright, smirked even more. It was holding a catheter which it plugged into Assmann[1]'s profusely bleeding intestine. While this transfusion was in process the anus delicately removed Assmann[1]'s eyes, moulding them into its own putative face. With its puckered mouth & stringy moustache it looked like a cross between the Marx Brothers & Margaret Thatcher.

Then it slowly, you might almost say lovingly, sucked out Assmann[1]'s brain. Right hemisphere first, through one eye-socket, left through the other. Sated, the anus discarded the catheter & belched. Taking its first foundling steps, it waddled bonelessly away from the discarded mess of its reluctant progenitor – across the HAB – past the CryoSa© from which Assmann[1]'s doppelganger gazed mournfully – to the outside airlock.

There was a moment when it looked like the scene was just going to end like that. But as the airlock hissed open, the anus turned to glance back before waddling on through. And as it did, still smirking that indefatigable smirk, it waved a boneless digit in salute.

"Hasta la vista, arsehole!"

ASK NOT WHAT THE ALGORITHM CAN DO FOR YOU, BUT WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR THE ALGORITHM!

The withered stump of the ancient fungus stood out from the canyon wall like a crumbling gothic pile. It'd been carbon-dated to 8000 years, before they'd dusted the Maze with defoliants. Its cap would've extended a mile out over the canyon floor, among a forest of smaller mushrooms, roofing it. Whole tribes of refugees had found shelter there, formed a collected identity, created a viable existence beyond the reach of TerraCom, the security apparatus, the corporations, the drone squads. All that was left now was that giant withered limb casting its shadow over a field of ballistic impact craters. Thousand upon thousands of them. Visible even through the layers of red dust.

Lamaisonblanche patiently scanned the area near the canyon wall. Close in, camouflaged in the lee of the dead fungus, were traces of a campsite. It was recent. Whoever'd been there had gone to lengths to conceal the fact. She detached her wrist drone & watched it zero in on the site, then begin to track.

Though the bulldust that covered everything was powder-fine, it preserved a clear pattern of striations. Ash from the fallout. Phosphorous from the Cydonia mines. Redder, more iron-rich layers blown in from the west. Ice crystals.

Whoever it was who'd tried to sweep their tracks clean as they wound back into the Maze had unwittingly painted a grey line half-a-metre wide on the canyon floor. A piece of sackcloth, perhaps. Or the hem of a djelaba. It didn't matter. She thumbed the controls & the drone accelerated, mapping the fugitive's route by relative albedo. Meaning it reflected more than the surrounding terrain, was cooler.

By toggling the contrast, the display showed a black line threading a white landscape. She gave the drone altitude. Somewhere, about 5 clicks west, the line petered out.

"Gotcha," she said out-loud.

"What we got?"

Bogart slid down beside her, a blur of mimetics. She heard him rather than saw him.

"One Beast maybe. Not sure."

"Careful you don't give our position away, Lieutenant. Beasts spot that drone, we're for it."

The advantage of not having to look at Bogart, Lamaisonblanche reflected, didn't outweigh the disadvantage of still having to listed to him mansplain every possible situation they were likely to encounter whenever they went on patrol together.

"Where's Sal?" she said.

"Point."

Jesus, she thought. *The arsehole thinks he's in one of those dumb films*.

"Well, sergeant," she said, zooming in on the target, "maybe you should secure the perimeter."

That last bit almost made her grin, except that something wasn't quite right. She took the zoom in to pixel-resolution, but there was nothing there. No heat-signature. Nothing. Something about the pattern of the line, too. The way the sand swept out at the edges. It seemed not to be leading *away*, but *back*. Quickly she reversed the drone, hit wide-angle, ran the metrics to see where the fugitive had circled around.

"I said, *Secure the perimeter, sergeant*," she hissed.

Bogart was silent. Something shimmered beside her. Then the mimetics gave out & she saw him, a singed hole where his left eye should've been. She hit the panic button on her wrist console, but it was frozen. She tried again but her hand, too, was frozen. She blinked, but the entire scene had frozen. Frozen rays of light tracked in through her eyes. At the last moment, she thought she saw what it was.

The bioreligionists stared down at Assmann with undisguised hostility. He couldn't move. Arms & legs paralysed. Some of the Crazies were gesturing, shouting at him, but he couldn't hear. Mouths swallowing air. Films of yellow dust. A fissile sky. The whole scene was smothered in jaundice. Then the blows began to descend. A voice said WELCOME TO THE FRONTIER CORPORATION. Assmann coughed. He could taste blood. Was it real or another head-glitch. Semiotic pollution seeping in from one of the subroutines? He remembered she looked like a 12-year-old & he looked like he'd died the week before. The exchange of youthful spit & venom for quiet & gentle pleasures. How many lifetimes in solitary had that been? They'd forced him to watch her being eaten alive by subdemonics. Her scream, like the Crazies', a thing silenced behind plate glass. He tried to wipe the sweat from his eyes, but couldn't. Somewhere an alarm had begun to go off. It felt like he'd had a nervous breakdown in his sleep. The harness was soaked-through with brine & his skin burned. A powerful stench of ammonia bit into his throat. Black shapes moved behind his eyes. Mysterious sigils. Presentiments flooded with each intake of breath. SEEK THE TRUTH ABOUT THOSE WHO CLAIM TO HAVE FOUND IT. The words flashed neon in a rainslashed sky. A door opened. Striplights. He was being wheeled backwards down a corridor. A white labcoat leaned over him. The decal read: Lamaisonblanche. WHO'S THE NEW ARRIVAL? she said. One of the orderlies said something back. Assmann tried to tell her his name, but his mouth had been gelled shut. Did that mean he was still alive?

Assmann adjusted the volume in his headset. It was the Deep Space Jihadis doing something retro with guitars & gloom-laden vocal synth…

Another day another desperation.
An empty platform at a Beltway station.
You cross the world so you can be like this,
you think you're doin' okay.
Monday morning in the life of a good boy.
It gets so hard just to be on time.
All the little things you dream of owning,
but ain't that okay?
In a room with a quiet stranger,
you know the score but you feel deranged.
There's a little voice inside your head,
says you'll make it okay.
Jack be nimble, Jack be quick.
Jack Flash & a candlestick.
You take a shot in the dark, take a dive,
but you'll be okay…
You wait around just to stand in line.
It gets further away each time.
You know enough to know what you've missed,
but ain't that okay?
IF YOU GET OUT A-L-I-V-E…?

Another bleak boundary on the Outer. Assmann squinted into the sepia glare. From here y'd be forgiven for thinking the world had died on hunger-strike. A shrivelled, desiccated world others, like him, had been forced to observe all through its immiseration. Too many comrades had fallen to despair & selfhatred. Conscripted by the Fash to do their dirty work. Remote ComSec droids plugged into your head. The algorithm urging you to do your best in killing the "enemy." The real enemy circling overhead, carrion-drones hungry to disassemble living flesh. If not one kind, another. There was a reason no-one ever saw vets in the cities. You got retired on the Frontier, like restocking a game park. It'd come round to him, too, eventually. He knew that. Unless he turned the gun on himself. *The taste of defeat*, was what they called that. For which they kicked your "hard working family" out of their home. Sent your kids to a reformatory. Wives, husbands, parents, anyone who was left, to the mines. *Incentivisation*, they called that. Suicide by class-consciousness. He only hoped that, when his time came, whichever one of those bastards got him in their sights, they'd make a clean shot of it.

VIII

[OPTOGRAFIA]

"I've mistaken myself for many things," the Stranger drawled, "but none of them was called Assmann."

Run out of water in the Maze & you've got just 100 hours left to live.

They fed that line to all the conscripts just to put a bug up their arses on the first airdrop out in chaos country. One litre regulation water ration & a couple of charcoal cartridges to piss through as a last resort. Last resort meant some time between sol 8 & sol 10 on a 2-week patrol. Miss the rendezvous on 14 & you may as well start drinking your own blood. Unless a recovery party found you first. Which they never did. Or the Beasts. In which case, so they said, your blood wouldn't be any more use to you anyway.

The last thing they ever saw. Strobed under the gnarled barrel of a particle canon. Tracer intervals closing then opening-out again like waves harassing a vast shore. If crossing space in a straight line. Pulse. First count the black regions in the sky. If the sky were slit open. Two parallel lines. Passing through both simultaneously.

Vegetised in his MkIII Cryo-Sa©, Assmann^2 was dumbly aware of an alien presence inside his console. Somewhere around 4:00A.M. it'd tuned-in to ancient TV signals rebounding through the solar system & he found himself in the hours since staring at Yogi Bear reruns. The monitor glitched. *Bzz!* Yogi Bear got squashed into a corner of the screen, one eye grotesquely enlarged. *Bzzz!* Yogi Bear got turned into an infinity sign. *Bzzzz! Bzzzzz!* Malevolent shapes danced. A disembodied hand. The muzzle of a raygun. A swirling abyss. *Bzzz!* Assmann^2 previewed himself freefalling through cathode-space, obliterated in storms of chromosomatic noise. *Yabbadabbadoo!*

Having perfected language, they'd gone in search of life elsewhere in the universe. Their strategic line of advance was an anagram of a gamma ray burst. Their epic poem was cryogenic sleep as experienced by a robot, in whose trust they placed their memories. Eons of mindless Ursonate. A supermassive blackhole in the vicinity of the root mean square.

What did it mean? Lamaisonblanche didn't know. She'd been directing the alien's interrogation since 4:am & still the creature wouldn't give up the key. The room stank. The alien had been left to shit all over the floor. Standard humiliation regime. One of its eyes had reacted to the chlorine by haemorrhaging profusely. Its jaw-line was a complete travesty. To add insult to injury, there was blood & faeces all up Lamaisonblanche's galoshes.

It was depressing to have to think about. And the way the translator just stood there with his mouth open in disbelief. ASSMANN stencilled above the LHS breastpocket of a shitbrown Desk Corps uniform.

Did the fucking ET really expect them to believe it'd come to Mars for the culture? How many others were there? That's what ComSec needed to know, to calculate their strength before the fucking ET hoards could position themselves for an attack.

This one'd been picked up out in Chaos Country, wandering around in a kind of daze, as if maybe it'd crash-landed out there, somewhere. Lone survivor stuff. Drones turned up a big zero, so maybe the aliens had some sort of teleportation device & this one was sent in advance as a spy, just with a bunch of fucked-up coordinates. Maybe ET telemetry was as fucked as True Martian telemetry haha. Or maybe it was just supposed to look that way, put ComSec off its guard. Maybe the dirty fucking ET was beaming mindwaves back right at that moment. Right under their fucking noses.

Lamaisonblanche didn't like it one little bit. She signalled to the attendant to hit the juice & a thousand volts zapped into the alien's head. Fried aspic was what it reminded her of. The alien spouted gibberish. The translator shook his head. Useless. Lamaisonblanche hoped the disgusting thing'd get on with it & croak, so she could finally ship it off to Forensics to cut up & her not to have to be left holding the bag. In a manner of speaking. Though what the fuck wasn't?

"Double it."

The attendant ratcheted the machine & at Lamaisonblanche's command flipped the switch again. Lights fluttered. Molten aspic splashed across the translator's face. Assmann screamed. Lamaisonblanche peered at the ET but it still wasn't dead.

"Fümms bö wö tää Uu, pögiff?"

The translator was gagging on his knees in the muck. Lamaisonblanche kicked him.

"Well?"

Assmann turned a pair of thyroid eyes towards her in silent pleading. She hoped he wasn't about to turn hysterical.

"What does it MEAN?!"

"It doesn't mean anything," Assmann wailed. "Just crazy stuff. The goddamn thing's crazy, that's all. Just crazy!"

The pixels recomposed into complex hypnotic suggestion-patterns. A burned photograph of G.O.D. within a consecrated polyhedron. A faint whiff of jasmine.

Through the smoke, Lamaisonblanche with dark languid eyes. A pair of vampire bicuspids. Threads of vapour between her lips. Mid-winter budget restrictions.

The film-set at Castle CumSuck looked like the only thing that'd stop it blowing over in a gust was the ice slicked all over everything. They shot the close-up then moved on to the basement laboratory scene.

Assmann was assiduously directing the whole thing by working backwards through the script. The filming was markedly taking its toll. By the time it was wrapped, half the actors would probably be in their graves.

The effect was pure chronomorphism. When they finally screened it, it'd be like raising the dead, grown visibly more alive with each frame. Time reversed.

All except Lamaisonblanche, trapped within eternity.

Just desserts for the untold carnal pleasures she'd had sucking the blood from all her former selves. A modest contribution to the history of progress.

with mesmeric fixity of purpose Lamaisonblanche fashions her eye into an electron microscope the better to observe matter's mattering for nine months day&night by baryogenesis descending into labours abject into surveillances unbound she wants to discover how Power exists electing her task to witness the climate & imagination of naked supremacy the vital origami of its rhythms its masses its aesthetic torments to invigilate the occult subornment of her kind by alien epistemologies & behold the immutable forms of submission: nerve-wracked & elated Lamaisonblanche confronts the literary giants with her discoveries knowing her destiny is to martyr her intellect no less than her body she asks them a simple question does the tree branch inwards or outward their reply is to commit her to an insane asylum yet for her the victory is won only the triumphant are so meticulously sodomised by the Great Teeth-Gnashing Instaurations till achieving purity-of-purpose at last they apear as paradigmatic as the footprints of Oedipus *hark the doors of imperception* those double-visioned Tiresias-eyes in torrents of black blood love me they say croaking LOVE ME

“Side-effects,” the Roobat explained to him, “are unpredictable & may include papillary dilation, visual hallucinations, amplification of sensations of sound & smell, temporal distortions, synaesthesia, sensations of the mind leaving the body, euphoria, impulsive behaviour, rapidly shifting emotions, mystical or religious experience, anxiety, panic, ego loss, delusion, paranoia, flashbacks, nausea, hypertension, vasoconstriction, increased body temperature, perceptual disorder, somatisation, depression, catatonia, psychosis.”

The signal rained from the magnetosphere with all the malevolence of pure chaos.

Assmann's best guess was that some orbiting bot had gone rogue & was furiously keymashing its way through every available frequency, spamming streams of randomness that had the TerraCom algorithms verging on hysterics.

It could've been an attack signal for ALIEN INVASION.

A breach in the core.

HungerBeasts at the gates.

Catastrophe imminence.

They'd never know until it happened or someone got a fix on the source, which right then seemed to be everywhere at once.

The entire sky was lit up like the Manhattan grid. Spooky.

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"The laws of thermodynamics," Lamaisonblanche said, addressing the press conference while leafing through a prepared dossier, "may describe necessary tendencies in a closed system, but like any description they do not constitute a teleology. Entropy is always balanced by conservation of mass. Unitarity. ER = EPR. The disappearance of gravity that has recently been observed in sections of the Maze implies that the local entropic medium is connected non-locally to an as-yet unidentified translocal medium. We are," she closed the dossier & laid it with measured force upon the lectern, "continuing with our inquiries."

The first question came from a journalist at the back.

"We're hearing reports that the Beasts have constructed a secret teleportation device capable of affecting the very fabric of time & space. Could you comment on this?"

ComSec's compliance drones were programmed to enforce a rigidly categorical distinction between the inside & the outside, defined by the Frontier Zone, if only to add fuel to the Colony's fears of interpenetration by the Beasts. It was for that same reason ComSec had created the Beasts in the first place. To give the People the enemy they desired.

Assmann[2] stared disconsolately at the monitor. A sickening sense of déjà vu came over him. Everything on the tubes was robot melodramas he'd seen before a hundred times, or reruns of the same old reality game-shows. Even the news channels were stale. He reached through the cryo-goo & switched again to the nonstop weather station. The forecast was the same as it always was. It sent a chill up the atrophied mass around his spine. Something was very clearly wrong. Why couldn't he just FORGET from one sol to the next, like everyone else? What were they DOING to him?

pointblank into the montage. their masks wear whatever face you desire. cloud cities radiating cosmic dollars. ratios of vitruvian brainmass. cryptomorphisms. the difficulty isn't, as the authorities insist, to make the impossible suddenly, suspiciously real, but to do so without anyone being the wiser. binding receptor proteins the way a blind arthritic reads. like a flaw transecting the relicked jawbone, invisible to all but the most avidly probing electron. the worlds revolve like ancient serotonin. what use is a POV if they're all the wrong one?

The Twins took turns peering into the electron microscope. What they were seeing didn't seem real. It couldn't be. They exchanged uneasy glances…

"What if…"

"…everything's entangled?"

"Bound together…

"…primordially…"

"…at a subatomic level?"

"The very fabric of the universe…"

"…woven together…"

"…baryons…"

"…gluons…"

"…gravitons…"

"…cosmically interlinked?"

"And what if…"

"…entanglement's like…"

"…timetravel?"

"If you alter something's…"

"…quantum state…"

"…it alters…"

"…all the representations of it…"

"…that exist…"

"…or have ever existed…"

"…or ever will exist?"

"Optographia," Assmann[1] said, peering down at the thing inside the CryoSa©. "With the right equipment, we should be able to recover an exact image of what it saw, right at the moment of death."

Assmann[2]'s eyes bulged against the translucent film. Rigor mortic digits clutched an unresponsive console. The murderer had simply unhooked the lifesupport system. If you could call it a life. Assmann[1] grimaced.

"Should be enough to get a positive ID."

"Unless," Lamaisonblanche lazily fanned a bunch of cables, "he didn't see who did it."

"*He*?"

"*It*, then, if it makes you feel more human."

She watched for a reaction, but he wasn't biting. For all she knew, they'd find *his* ID fused into the dead thing's retina.

Lamaisonblanche shook her head slowly. Who the fuck kept their doppelganger in a CryoSa© anyway? She'd never seen anything like it. It was virtually Assmann[1]'s mirror image. Hers had looked like a half-grown foetus. It would've fit in a jar. She was conscious when they found it, six months out. They vented it during entry, to burn up in the atmosphere. She couldn't even begin to imagine how Assmann[1] had got this one past quarantine. ComSec had a bounty on illegals.

"The Maze is full of them," Assmann[1] said, as if intuiting her thoughts.

Maybe he had. Lamaisonblanche thumbed her decal to alert the backup crew. The HAB felt suddenly unsafe. Or unwell. She eyed the airlock.

"Hundreds of them. Just like that," he jerked his chin at the dead thing. "I figured out how they do it, too. I've been conducting experiments. To get to the truth. Someone must've found out."

"Someone?" Laimaisonblanche quietly slipped her neuraliser from its holster. "Or some*thing*?"

Assmann[1] stared in disbelief as she drew the stun weapon. But his disbelief was short-lived. No sooner was the weapon levelled at his chest than Lamaisonblanche herself turned to static &, a moment later, faded entirely from the picture.

"Good shooting, Sal," Bogart's voice crackled from the doppelganger's console.

Rigor mortic fingers reached up through a fresh blast-hole to tear open the CryoSa©. Sal stood up out of the mess, shaking off gobs of cryo-goo & holding a latex mask. In his other hand he was clutching a high-powered image transducer.

"Deep cover," Sal explained. "She was an infiltrator. HungerBeast AvantSquad. We knew they'd tip their hand sooner or later."

"They'd already tried making contact," Bogart's voice crackled. "They figured Sal here was the real deal. Sent your sweetheart to pull a switcheroo. Liberate the doppelganger & snuff you in its place."

"That's right," Sal grinned. "But we nixed that little plan."

Assmann[1] nodded thoughtfully. Then grinned.

"Sure looks like you did that."

"Sure does," Sal grinned back. "Doesn't it?"

[FILE HAS BEEN DELET-ED]

FIRST THE LANDING STRIP. THEN THE BLACK DUSTCLOUD PARTING ON THE CYDONIA SPRAWL, FLATTENED OUT AGAINST THE PLATEAU. A MONTAGE OF PATHLESS REFLECTIONS, VEILS OF LIGHT BLEEDING INTO DARKER PRECINCTS. AT ITS CORE, PEELING FROM THE DOME, A DOZEN GIANT CONSTRUCTION ARMS IN CONSTANT IF INDISCERNIBLE MOTION. LIKE A FLOATING MEDUSA.